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Northern Review

of Writing and the Arts in Canada

E. J. PRATT:
A Major Contemporary Poet

This issue is devoted almost entirely to E. J. Pratt. It is published in the belief that Pratt's significance has been misinterpreted and that he deserves to be ranked as a major poet. The contents consist of *The Great Feud* — one of the poet's early narratives — and a detailed analysis of the three major poems: *The Cachalot, The Titanic* and *The Great Feud.*

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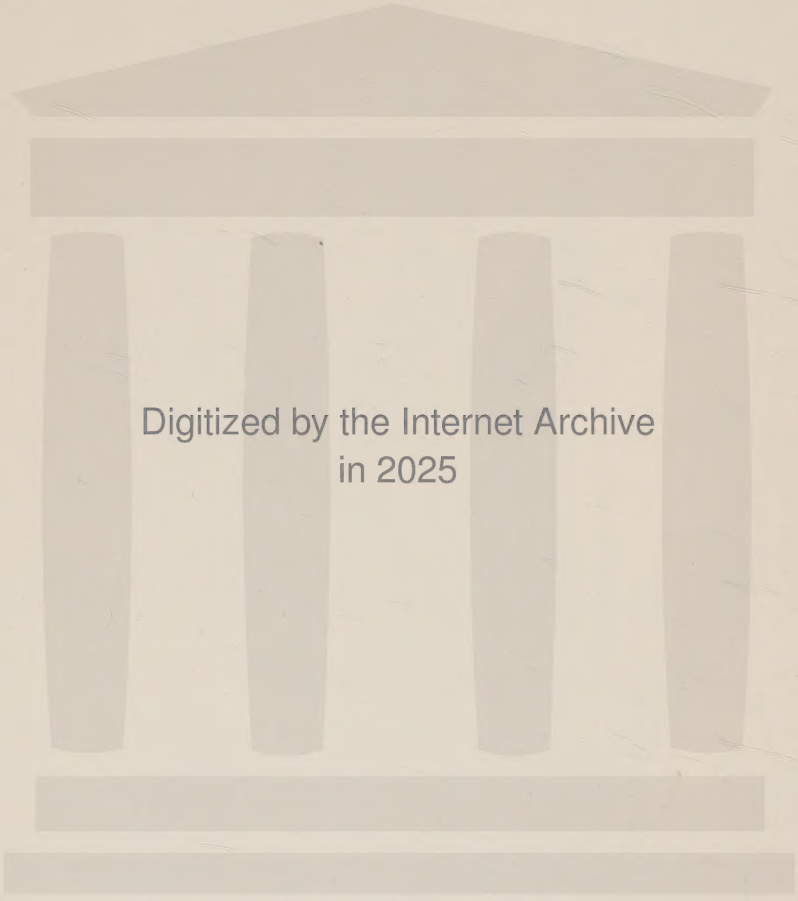
Portrait by Kenneth Forbes

E. J. PRATT



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Northern Review

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We are indebted to The MacMillan Company of Canada for permission to reprint *The Great Feud* and portions of other poems from *The Collected Poems of E. J. Pratt.*

The Great Feud: A Dream of a Pleiocene Armageddon

E. J. Pratt

Like a quarter moon the shoreline curled
Upon the neck of the ancient world,
Where, as the modern Magians say,
In one cool morning of the Earth,
Australasia had its birth,
And vertebrated with Malay.
Monsoons from Arafura Seas
Had played their native energies
Full upon the western tip,
Until the vast recessional
Of scourging wash and tidal rip
Had made a stubborn littoral
Take on a deep indented shape,—
A hundred leagues, to the eastern Cape,
Of broken bays with narrow reaches,
Deltas and gulfs bulwarked by steep
Eroded headlands, with a sweep
Of fifty miles of central beaches,
And rich alluvial flats where luscious
Grasses, ferns and milk bulrushes
Made up the original nursery
For fauna of the land and sea.
Stretching from the water line
By gentle slope and sharp incline,
Past many an undulating plain,
The land ran southward to a chain
Of heavy-wooded hills and rose
Beyond them to the Black Sierras,
Soaring aloft to where the snows

That capped the ranging Guadeleras
Were blackened by the brooding dread
Outline of a volcano's head,—
Jurania, with her crater jaw,
Her slanting forehead ancient-scarred,
And breathing through her smoky maw,
Lay like a dragon left to guard
The Isthmian Scarps against the climb
Of life that left the ocean slime,
In far adventurous design,
On footholds past the timber line.
In such a place, at such a time,
Long before the birth of man,
This great Tellurian feud began.

For ages which cannot be told
The fish along the Isthmian border
Had felt the invasion of their cold
Blood by an unexplained disorder.
It looked as if the destination,
Of all life of the stock marine,
Was doomed to be, through paths unseen,
The most profound obliteration.
Millions of youthful fins were led
Far from their safe and watery bed,
To sport along the tidal edge,
Nosing for grubs and water-lice,
For pickerel weed and shoots of rice
That grew luxuriant within the sedge,
And many feasting unawares
Were drawn into relentless snares;
Strange rasp-and-saw bills harried them,
And swooping talons carried them
Into the air, and many more
Were stranded high and dry on shore,
Where poisonous lizards, asps and adders
Bit them, or where the solar fire
Caught them at noon-tide in the mire,
Curdled their blood and starched their bladders.
And thousands that survived the heat

Turned their backs upon their breed,
Shed their fins and took on feet,
And clambered far inland to feed
On windy things like grass and roots,
Bark and leaves and bitter sloes,
Or, like those horrid jungle brutes
With hairy pelts and horny toes,
To quaff the warm blood of their foes;
While many more that did return,
After one aeonian night,
Come back contemptuous to spurn
Their parents, like the trilobite,
With stony back and stonier heart;
Rolled up in balls and dwelt apart
In sulky isolation; while others,—
The mongrel water scorpions sprung
From crabs and spiders,—came and stung
Their little sisters and their brothers.

And thus it was throughout the whole
Sea-range of the Australian zone,
The fear of racial doom was thrown
Heavily upon the piscine soul.
A futile anger like a curse
Only made confusion worse.
Their mad desire to strike back
At their destroying coward-foe
Turned all their fury of attack
Into consuming vertigo.
It broke their hearts and crushed their wills,
It thinned the juices of their maws,
Left them with gnashing of the jaws
And deep prolapsis of the gills.
And hitherto unsuffered pains,
A ghastly brood, came by in legions,
Rheumatic tremors in the veins,
And palsy in the ventral regions.
Now, not a single evening passed
But an aquatic breathed its last
Beneath the terrifying roar

Of some dread plantigrade on shore;
And so this strange insidious spark
Of wild adventure carried sorrow
To many a yearning matriarch
With the drab dawning of the morrow.
But worst of all the horrors which
Enmeshed them was the galling sense
That never would the recompense
Of battle come; that the primal itch
For vengeance would expend its force,
According to an adverse Fate,
Running a self-destroying course
Down the blind alley of their hate.
But by some quirk that Nature flings
Into the settled scheme of things,—
That old beldame, she gets so grumpy,
No mortal vision may foretell
Her antics, when her nerves are jumpy—
It happened that she broke the spell
By a freak shifting of the odds
Within the sea-lap of the gods.

Vibrant calms unknown before
Lay on the Australasian shore,
And Silences, a hooded band,
Like portents of catastrophe,
Tip- toed expectant on the land,
And mummed about the open sea.
Neptune had resigned the trident,
For months Aeolus had not spoken,
Nor had the sea-waves heard the strident
Trumpeter,—his conch was broken.
From igneous fissures in the ground
Blue wisps of smoke with eerie sound
Curled on the air to indicate
That some elaborate escapade
Was on the point of being played
By the royal clowns of Fate.
Here and there through asphalt holes
Was heard a most uncanny racket,—

Charon, before the birth of souls
Called for his modern Stygian packet,
Was busy at enormous scows,
Caulking them with walrus skin,
Hammering, sawing to the din
Of Cerberus with his gruff bow-wows,
Together with the gird and clatter
Of wheels and whiffletrees, the croak
Of scranny throats, and the fast patter
Of feet and flap of wings, that spoke
Of straining, jostling ambulances;
Of Hecate with a frightful brood
Of harpies in a phantom wood,
Rehearsing new macabre dances.
Now all this strange activity
Was radiating everywhere;
It rapped the calms upon the sea,
It shot through flumes of stagnant air,
It tingled in the blood of brutes
Of land and water; in the roots
Of trees; and even stuff like rocks
Felt the strong etheric shocks,
Until all natural things that dwelt
In the marine Australian belt
Had come to feel, in a dumb way,
That their protracted evil spell
Might, with the birth of any day,
Dissolve before a miracle.

One vital morning when the tide
Was out and the Scala flats were dried,
The largest-livered heaviest-brained,
Most thoroughbred pedestrian
Of all the tribes that had attained
The rank of the amphibian,
A green-back turtle left the sea.
Her blood was changing and a scent,
Unknown to her rude ancestry,
Had charged her with presentiment
Of some unfathomed destiny.

She had her eyes upon a spot
She long aspired to, but had not
For lack of muscle, wind and time,
Been able to effect the climb.
To-day, with fast evolving legs,
Urged by the lure of distant land,
She struggled for this cone of sand,
Proudly there to lay her eggs,
And from this vantage point, some day,
To take her young and wend her way,
Far up into the hills, to view
What kind of giant there might dwell
Stretched asleep against the blue,—
A turtle with a snow-white shell,
Or inland whale, for aught she knew,
Sending through a spiracle,
Intermittent puffs of gray
Cloud resembling ocean spray.
But when after four dusty hours
She reached the top of the sandy cone,
A thrill her blood had never known
Paralysed her laying powers,
And concentrated all her thought
Upon the scene the morning brought.

An amphitheatre that held
Valleys and cliffs and waterfalls,
Gorges hewn like royal halls,
Forests flanked by hills that swelled
To mountain, these again to clouds
From peaks of ice; and everywhere
On ground, in trees and in the air,
All forms of living things; dense crowds
Of kites and gulls; vultures that hung
Within the blue; and mangabees;
Pig-tailed baboons that peered and swung
From the liana of the trees;
Wombats beneath acacias;
Tasmanian tigers in the grass;
Vivets and sloths and bandicoots;

High-standing elks in hollowed stumps
Of redwood; tapirs in the clumps
Of banyan, grubbing at the roots;
And under eucalyptus trees,
Flocks of emus and kiwis,
With herds of skipping kangaroos,
Antelopes and brindled gnoos;—
All Earth's delegates were sent,
Blood relations, tribal foes,
Bound by cordial entente,
To this prodigious Parliament;—
Lions and water-buffaloes,
Clouded leopards, chamois droves,
Side by side and cheek by nose,
Rested in the myrtle groves;
While pumas, rams and grizzly bears
Stroked each other in their lairs.
And central to this wild tableau,
A white giraffe began to scale
A scraggy monolith of shale,
Standing on a high plateau.
And when his neck had arched the summit,
A female anthropoidal ape
Climbed up, and settling on the nape,
Surveyed the crowded congress from it.
The comeliest of the Primate race,
No one of all the Southern lands
Could match her for arboreal grace,
For hairy contour of her hands,
For contemplation in her face,
Or wisdom in her thyroid glands.
To hide her young, to fight or climb,
She was the cleverest of her time.
She taught the family tribes to make
A briar or a bamboo stake,
Fashion an eolith and throw
It deadly at a distant foe,
To charge in serried ranks, or beat
A hurried or prepared retreat,
Showed them new uses for their paws

In battle for the monkey cause.
And faintly she had sniffed the raw
Material of the moral law;
She had observed, one windy night,
The skull of an alligator cut
Open by a cocoanut
Falling from a lofty height,—
An alligator that had torn
And eaten up her youngest born.
Then to a corner she had crept,
And had not eaten, had not slept,
But scratched her head and drummed her breast,
And Reason entered as she wondered,
Brooded in the trees and pondered
On how the reptile was struck dead.
And now on wide and just behalf
Of all the land brutes of the world,
She took the leadership and curled
Around the neck of the giraffe;
And all at once confusion ceased,
As every hard raptorial beak
And slanted eye of bird and beast
Were strained upon the central peak,—
And every lobe of every ear
Was cocked that none might fail to hear
The message when the ape unfurled
Her simian marvel to the world.

All ye that dwell afar or nigh
Upon the plains or on the hills,
In valley caves or in the sky,
Feathers, and bristles, talons, quills,
Flesh-eating ones and herbivores
That roam inland or ramp the shores;
All ye with snouts that turn the furrow
For colonies of ants or burrow
For savoury roots and fattened worms;
And ye that carry on your sides
Impenetrable armour hides,
Slow-moving, ponderous pachyderms;

All ye that lie in wait and crouch
And gnashing leap upon your prey;
And those that at the breast or pouch
Suckle the young; all ye that lay,
And scratch the ant-hills with your claws;
And all that brotherhood that climb,
Cracking great nuts between the jaws;
Give ear and know ye that the time
Has come when he that slumbereth
Shall pay the penalty of death.
Turn ye your gaze, a moment, far
Beyond the plain over the height
Of the palm trees where the white
Foam-line breaks upon the bar.
There under the blue stretch of sea,
Living in darkness out of sight
Skulks our ancient enemy,
Devouring everything that passes
Along the great lagoons to feed
On clams and shrimps and rich swamp grasses
Growing beside the tidal weed.
By right of conquest and of birth
We claim all footholds on this Earth;—
Those flats there steaming in the sun,
The coast-line to the salted edge
Where the coral foam is spun,
That long three-cornered, rocky wedge
On which the walrus warms his hide,
Where the dugong sleeps,—which the manatee
Claims as his dwelling when the sea
Sucks it from us at high tide.
All ye that hail from foreign parts
Whose warm blood knocking at your hearts
Has led you to this southern place,
Attend upon my words! and know
What great disaster to our race
Befell us thirty years ago.
You noticed as you cleared the height
Of the Aral range that, to the south,
Three juts of land came into sight,

Extending far out of the mouth
Of the Ravenna river;—these
Have ever been the nurseries
For the monkey tribe and kangaroo,
For gentle bears and wallabies,
For marmoset and wanderoo,
And for the crinkly-tail baboon.
On one dread summer day—at noon—
A terror broke upon our eyes;
We saw the blazing sun go out,
And the level sea begin to rise
Under the breath of a typhoon,
And break with tidal water-spout,
Carrying with the general ruin
Of the palms, the aged and the young,
The mother bear and little bruin;
And wailing mandrill babes that clung
To the parental neck were flung
Into the watery abyss
To satisfy the avarice
And lust of every carrion foe
And devil-fish that dwelt therein.
To-day that slaughter at the Delta
Remains the nightmare of the years;
Those death-cries of the apes could melt a
Stony crocodile to tears.
Since then, their blood-thirst unappeased,
They've ventured up our quiet streams;
Gannets and herons have been seized,
Baboons have died with horrid screams,
And elephantine calves for miles
All along the water-courses,
Together with young water-horses,
Have been dragged down by crocodiles.
For years reports have been received
From distant countries occupied
By furs, feathers and hairs allied
By blood, how they have been bereaved
And plunged in blackest misery
By that insane, consuming hate

Of ignorant, inarticulate
Cold-blood barbarians of the sea.
All we observant ones have seen
That at high tides in clouded moons
The habits of the fish have been
To pass into the great lagoons,
To lie in wait throughout the course
Of night and morning to midday,
Then chase our swimming breeds and slay
Them with no feeling of remorse;
And then with foul-distended maw,
The cowards that they are withdraw
To their unlighted haunts, to shun
An open struggle in the sun.
Therefore, let it now be known,
By tokens that can never err,—
By the marrow in the fox's bone,
By the light growth of the ermine's fur,
And by the camel's drinking bout,
That the season's blasting drought,
With lowering of the tides, will last
Till three up-tilted moons have passed.
Then will the inland shallows be,
At all their gateways unexposed
To the waters of the open sea,
When the barrier reefs have closed.
So if our hearts are resolute,
At the appointed hour we'll match them
With our brave hosts in massed pursuit;
No quarter shall there be: we'll catch them,—
From the smallest to the largest brute—
Throw them into consternation,
Hem them in the muddy places
And on the shoals, leaving no traces
Save of their damned annihilation.
Before I close—just one word more.
Oft have we seen a jealous raid
Grow into a great crusade;
Or end by internecine war,
When the blood of kindred drenched

The higher mountain snows and quenched
The jungle grass and arid moors.
Therefore ye thirsty carnivores
Be ye adjured that till the hour
Of trial ye shall not devour
The flesh of either animal
Or bird upon the Earth; nor shall
Ye taste of blood; your daily food
Shall be the Earth's fair yield of fruits,
Her store of plants and sappy roots,
The fresh rind of the sandalwood,
And willow bark, berries and beans,
Tussac grass and mangosteens,
Papaws and guavas and the sweet
Milk of the cocoanut, the meat
Of durian with celery,
The ripe fruit of the mango-tree;
Yea—all the natural plenitude
Of Earth shall henceforth be your food.
Likewise ye herbivores, be ye
Adjured against all enmity.
Ye shall not trample; shall not gore,
With hoof or horn, the carnivore;
But as their allies, ye shall spend,
In one grand consummating blow
Of death against the common foe,
Your strength to a triumphant end.
Now hie ye to your lairs; sleep not;
Gather your hosts; abate no jot
Of this day's wrath, and when the year
Is big with three up-tilted moons,
We'll charge on the aquatics here,
And trap them in the great Lagoons.

She spoke: and every throat and lung
Of herbivore and carnivore,
In volleying symphonic roar,
Rang with persuasion of her tongue.
With vengeance firing up the breast,
And with the speed of a monsoon blast,

The keen dispersing hordes soon passed
Beyond the skyline of the West.
And the sultriness of peace again
Brooded on valley, hill and plain,
Shaken only when a cloud
Of thick Juranian vapour, thrown
In a dark spiral, burst with loud
Echoes, like laughter from the cone.
Scrambling from her hill of sand,
The disillusioned, now unfertile,
Amphibious and bilingual turtle
Fled the spectre of the land;
Crossed the muddy flats and sought her
Endangered kindred of the water,
Apprised them of their bloody fate;
The congress vote; the rage and hate
Of the ape; her story of the feud,
And the news was borne at ether rate
Throughout the ocean's amplitude,
And hailed with fierce, exultant mood,
With wave of pectorals and high leap
Into the air and foamy sweep
Of tail and clutch of tentacle;
Broken was the hoary spell!
The hour for revenge, for daring,
Had come for fin and scale and shell!
For shark! swordfish! mackerel!
Lobster! octopus! and herring!

WITH THE PASSAGE OF THE MOONS

THE MUSTER

Black bucks whose distant ancestry
Sprang from the (now) Westphalian hills;
Wild boars with hair as stiff as quills,
Or Brandenburgian pedigree;
Wallachian elks, whose antlers spread
A full five feet above the head,
Trekked around the Caucasus,

Sounding with defiant stare
Their gutturals blent with blasphemous
Umlauts upon the stricken air;
And they were joined near Teheran
By camels down from Turkestan,
And elands from Trans-Caspian snows,
Persian gazelles with harts and roes,
Arabian antelopes and masses
Of quaggas, zebras and wild asses;
And on the eastern move, they met
Horses following in the tracks
Of ibexes and shaggy yaks
From South Bokhara and Thibet
And countries far-distributed;
The thunderous Indian quadruped,—
Rhinoceros and elephant,
And every kind of ruminant,
And non-cud chewing animals,
Mammal and marsupial;
From hill and valley, steppe and prairie,
Peccary and dromedary,
Bashan bull and Cashmir ram,
The male spring-bok, chamois, gnoo,
The reid-buck and the kangaroo
Heading downwards through Siam.
Likewise, with earth-shattering roars,
Accompanied by the screams of birds,
From the wide compass came the herds
Of storming hungry carnivores.
On them the patriotic call
Fell with the greatest sacrifice.
A troop of tigers from Bengal,
Full of caraway and rice,
(In keeping with the simian pledge)
Discovering early that their edge
Of appetite was dulled enough
By such ill-regulated stuff
Upon a base of hops and oats,
Attacked (although they did not slay)
A flock of Himalayan goats

Resting on a wooded height
In their mid-journey to Malay;
They drained their udders, bleached them white,
And leaving them in awful plight,
Prostrate and helpless for the fray,
Passed on with energy renewed
Into the Australasian feud.
Through scorching plains and bleak defiles
Of Northern India's spacious miles,
Spread a vast host of tawny, mad
Lions from Allahabad.
Oleanders, roots of taro
With ginseng and dried kauri cones
Had changed the substance of their marrow,
And alternated growls with groans.
Hyænas forced-fed on salt-bush
With sago palms and tapioca
Wailed so loudly that they woke a
Pack of wolves from Hindu Kush,
Whose tocsin cry antiphonal
Was caught by every caracal
Sleeping with his stomach full
Of rhododendrons near Cabul;
And this was followed by the blab
Of jackals cursed with elderberry
All the way from the Punjab
As far South-East as Pandicherry.
Over the stretch from Turkestan,
From Shamo Desert to Hunan,
From Shantung down to Singapore,
Along the central isthmus, fell
The mighty, myrmidonian roar,
That ululant and choric yell
Of leopards full of okra pods
And lentils; cheetahs gagging hard
At cascarilla spiced with nard;
Polecats charged with cotton wads,
And bears and civets overcome
With stringent eucalyptus gum.
All these in thousands numberless

Had, with the triple lunar round,
Arrived, in hot blood-thirstiness,
Upon the Isthmian battle ground,
Where, when the welter of their roars
Had ceased along the littoral border,
The hordes were disciplined to order,
Divided into army corps,
Brigades, battalions and platoons;
Some were ambushed by the coast
In heavy scrub and bush, but most
Were stationed near the great lagoons
Connected with the hostile beaches,
And regimented into shape
By the anthropoidal ape
Who, by her rousing martial speeches,
Kept up to fever heat their zeal
For the imperilled commonweal.
At last when the appointed week
Had come; and when the final night
Was over with the first faint streak
Of orange in the Eastern light,—
Just at the hour when every pad
And hoof were tingling with the mad
Moment of impending slaughter,
A reeking, ghastly, unknown flair
Compounded of the earth and water,
Of subterranean clay and air,
And like no other scent, arose
And fell upon each roving nose.

Over the top of the nearest alp
A cliff-like head began to rise;
A lizard's skull with horny scalp,
Dragon's teeth and boa's eyes;
Covered with scales of greenish blue
The lower jaw swung into view,
And from the open mouth there came
A lolling tongue of scarlet flame;
A column of a neck whose reach
Topped the high branches of a beech;

Prehensile arms and girthy paunch
Upheld by massive spine and haunch
Are followed by unmeasured thighs;
With hock and joint the inches rise,
Until the monster in dread sight
Of all, to the last claw, collects
His stature on the Aral height,
And, lo,—TYRANNOSAUROS REX!

Now let the sceptic disbelieve
The truth I am about to state,
And urge, with curling lip, I weave
A legend that is out of date.
Let him disgorge his lie; I claim
That by a wanton twist of Fate,
(To which I am by Hera sworn)
A creature of this sounding name,
Although three million years too late,
Stood on that peak this awful morn.
It came to pass, one day, before
Mammals appeared upon the Earth,
A dinosaurian mother bore
Tyrannus in a tragic birth.
Chasing a mighty stegosaur
Into a bed of pitch, she tried,
With huge success, before she died,
To lay an egg that chanced to live
Throughout its long bituminous night,
Enveloped by this soft, air-tight
Most excellent preservative;
Until just fifty years ago,
When the volcano underwent
Her seismal periodic throe,
The egg came bounding through a rent.
A moa passing by espied
The object; sidled up, cock-eyed,
And watched it with a mother's pride.
Like a beach-stone pumiced by the sea,
It glowed with the full sunlight on it.
She sniffed the thing excitedly,

Walked around it, pecked and scratched
The shell, then feathered down upon it.
And in due course of time she hatched
Her prodigy. At first she fed him
On cotton-tails and unweaned lambs,
On calves and badgers; then she led him
To the higher ridges where she filled
His stomach with the coarser hams
Of pigs and short-horn mountain rams,
Until he took on strength and killed
All comers with their sires and dams.

Now after fifty years, the bird
Had, from a cassowary, heard
About the Pan-cyclonic rally
Of beasts in the Juranian Valley,
And how at their great gastric session
They swore to stand by the Food Concession.
And so the moa felt she'd serve her
Race the best, fanning the wild
Instinct of her foster child
With her strong patriotic fervour.
She found *this* lesson easy for
A huge blood-quaffing dinosaur;
The next one that she strove to teach,—
To feed on rushes, roots and grass,—
Seemed to this hungry ward, alas,
Beyond his intellectual reach.
Still, after days of bleats and pants,
Of clucking at the balsam cones,
Of digging graves for flesh and bones,
And building pyramids of plants;—
And after days of petulant scolding,
She managed to convey, by holding
Within her talons, cocoanuts
And bread-fruit rather than the cuts
From the sirloin of putrid cattle,—
That fasting from all flesh and blood,
And chewing, self-imposed, of cud,
Was the condition of the battle.

And so the fatal morning found
Him bloated, angry and unsound
Of wind and reeling down the height
For flesh, his object of the fight.
His skyward neck took on the form
Of a pliant topmast in a storm.
His headlong and unsteady gait
Had been the more provoked, of late,
By a yeasty alimentary state.
For, on the day before, twitch grass
With coarse buck wheat and sassafras
Had formed the staple of his diet.
A vinery of red grape then lay
Before him; he resolved to try it;
Which done, his head began to sway,
The hot, fermenting liquor rose,
And just before the charge was made,
Had sluiced up through his neck, and played
A geyser through his throat and nose,
Until his body seemed to seethe
With dragon foam on scale and claw,
The scarlet dripping from his teeth,
And fire issuing from his jaw.
The ape had feared the monster's coming
Would cause a panic as the sound
Of thunder from the infernal drumming
Of Tyrannus' feet upon the ground,
Breaking like waves along the coast,
Fell upon the affrighted host.
And for a moment as he neared
The rostral monolith and tossed
His head for carnage it appeared
As if the national cause was lost.
So strong the impact as he hit
A line of tigers near the centre
It paralysed the simian's wit
And for a fearful second rent her
Courage as the jungle mass
Went floundering in a deep morass.
But instant as a thunderclap

The prescience of her soul awoke,
For by that self-same tiger stroke
Tyrannosauros filled the gap,
And as the stress upon the line
Was centrally towards the sea,
She caught the panic's energy
Of flight in time, and flashed the sign
Of battle from her lofty tower,
Then launched the seething frenzied power
Of tusk and claw. Blood red the Dawn!
The die was cast! The fight was on!

Now was seen the strategy
Hidden in the stern decree
Of the wise old anthropoid.
The long-continued carnal void,
With all its gastric irritation,
Had raised their lust to slay and eat
Raw flesh to the internal heat
Of a universal conflagration.
Just in from dry Allahabad,
Farinaceous lions had
Spied, upon an oozy bank,
Five hundred head of walruses,
Their hides of rubber steaming rank
With odours oleaginous.
Such was their fury when they smelled them,
It seemed as if the nether air
Were raining tails and brindled hair,—
The way those brutes of India felled them;
They had them stripped before the sun
Arose to bleach each skeleton.
Fifteen miles farther down the Coast,
An angry and conglomerate host,—
Inflammatory Bengalese,
Starved with cherry bark and peas;
With salicaceous jaguars,
Leguminous leopards full of beans
That murmured in their jugulars,—
Swooped, with the speed of peregrines,

Upon the red substantial meals
Of dolphins hot and blubberous,
And a large school of porpoises,
Manatees and ursine seals,
Until the sand-spit where they were
Surrendered back unto the sea
Not one shred of fat or fur
But polished skulls and vertebrae.
Down a sharp declivity
Where the eastern skyline touched a plain,
Wild cats of Burmese demonry
Fell like a cloud of typhoon rain.
Raisins had so alkalized them
That the fur upon their necks had moulted,
Soyas and poppies which they bolted
Stuck in their throats and agonized them.
So swift and vital was their spring
When circling round a "Sulphur Bottom,"
They drove him on the rocks and got 'im
Like turkey buzzards on the wing,
Pouncing on a carrion,
Until beneath the morning sky
His ribs were arching high and dry
Like the frame of a stranded galleon.

With the first hours of the day
It seemed the battle fortunes lay
In ample margins with the land.
No courage of the sea could stand
Against the all-consuming, savage
Hunger springing from such a fast,
Nor millions numberless outlast
That crash of pyramidal ravage.
But with the pangs of thirst abated,
A temporary slackening of the drive
Gave to the fish infuriated
With loss a moment to revive
Their ranks, when soon upon the air
New cries of terror and despair
Announced destruction for the land.

Rounding the Roc peninsula,
Sperm whales from Carpentaria
Had reached the Dura bank of sand,
And bellying round, began to blow
Their challenge in contemptuous spout
At any brute the earth could show
Possessing horn or tusk or snout.
Undaunted, a battalion
Of bulling elephants from Canton,
Directed by a jackass, tore
Their ponderous course down to the shore,
In answer to the loud defiance
Of those humpbacked mammalian giants.
Lured by the low ebb of the tide,
And a hundred yards of bar, sun-dried,
They plunged into the quicksands where,
With roar of suction and the blare
Of strained uplifted trunks, they died,
Or slipping into weedy ground
Off the silting edge, were drowned
At leisure by the sweeping tails
And jaw-tug of victorious whales.

Down at the delta of Ravenna,
The hardest struggle of the day
For three long hours was under way,
Wild as the tumult of Gehenna.
A thousand tigers of the land
Were fighting, under the command
Of a Sumatran chimpanzee,
Ten thousand tigers of the sea.
The thirstier cats that formed the van
Took the water, swimming far
Beyond the shallows of the bar,
Heedless of the risk they ran;
Others of more tempered daring,
Striking the water margin, kept
Well within their depth but swept
Along the muddy regions, tearing
The placid surface into spray,

Like a gale's lash upon a bay.
For those three hours the waters ran
With every hue of the rainbow span,—
Saffron lines and serpentine,
Lurid darts of iris green,
Mottled browns with dusky stripe,
Eyeballs flashing streaks of red,
Leaped and zigzagged to the gripe
Of lamia and of hammerhead,
Locking with inveterate teeth
The tigers' bellies underneath.
Phantoms blue and ashen pale
Followed white ones in the race
Where blade of dorsal, scythe of tail
Cut and ripped the water's face,
Curved and sank while in their place
The vitreous glare of stomachs rose
With flapping pectorals, as the claws
Of tigers tore a bottle-nose
Or bullet-head; or as their jaws,
Just at the moment they were drowned,
With paralysing seizure found
Their last authentic tiger mark
In the marble throat of a slate blue shark.
And when the fierce dispute was over,
And the tides were crimson in the sun,
The splash of a ground shark or the dun,
Lithe shadow of an ocean rover,
Cutting across the backward spins
Of settling eddies showed how vast
Was the jungle ruin when at last
The furs were conquered by the fins.

Beyond the edge of the chalk canal,
In the deeper part of the Skibo Run
The tiger slaughter was outdone
By a longer, bloodier carnival.
There, neutral hippopotami,
Spotted deer, mild-mannered sows,
Milk-white mules and buffalo cows

Had wandered with their young to lie
And bathe beneath a peaceful sky,
With antelopes and quagga mares,
Soft gazelles and brown she-bears,
Frightened by the roars that rent
The rafters of the firmament;
When suddenly as by design
It seemed as if the whole Pacific
Had yielded up her most terrific
Monsters of the fighting line.
Their long blades flashing in the sun,
Sword-fish were swimming up the Run,
Accompanied by flagitious things,—
Saw-bills with their deadly pikes,
Thornbacks with their poisoned spikes,
Torpedo rays with scorpion stings;
Most feared by everything that lives
Above the ocean floor, they broke
With full mortality of stroke
On neutrals and on fugitives,
Hemmed them backwards from the beaches
Into the water's deeper reaches,
Where with rapiers lightning sped,
They took the measure of their sides,
Till all the antelopes were dead,
And all the hippos' leathery hides
Transfixed and all the bears were drilled
With holes and all the calves were killed.

Now late within the afternoon
Again the tide of battle changed.
Fish from the Seven Seas were ranged
Along the stretch of the Blue Lagoon
That had beneath the withering spell
Of three hot rainless moons been closed.
There, lash-rays—the marines of hell—
Had come with sharks,—the shovel-nosed,
And sickle-finned; dog-fish, big jacks
Gifted with prophetic smell,—
All following in the conquering tracks

Of threshers from the Hebrides,
Of Greenland killers and those mailed,
Tremendous rhinodons that hailed
From the typhoons of the Indian seas.
Against that swarming, heaving pack
Was launched the raving, massed attack
Of full-grown argali, and rams
From South Afghanistan that mourned
The swordfish slaughter of their dams;
And fighting boars that would have scorned
Brigades of tigers, with koodoos,
Flanked by battalions of gnoos,
And bull-head rhinos double-horned.
Into that reeling, shapeless ruck,
Scarce covered by the water poured
This furious and avenging horde. . .
Surviving rhinodons that struck
For ocean spaces through the ford
Were caught fast in the mire, and gored
To death by stag and water-buck.

And as the dubious hours went by,
Cormorants, in carrion mood,
Ospreys and kestrels thronged the sky,
Impatient, as the fiery feud
Swung through such vicissitude
As never, after or before,
Was known within the files of War.
Such acts of valour as were done
Outshone the white flame of the sun;—
Such hopeless sacrificial deeds
And feats of strength as might belong
To men or gods, when weaker breeds
Wrecked their bodies on the strong.
Reversals with the strangest luck,
Unknown to contests in the sea,
Took place where bulk and energy
Matched themselves with skill and pluck.
Mackerel and electric eels
Drowned zebras, weighting down their thighs;

Leonine and ursine seals
Were killed by lemurs and aye-ayes.
To rescue otters with their young
From saw-fish and an instant slaughter,
A scouting beaver party flung
Themselves into the salted water,
Were caught, outnumbered and were beaten,
Run through by bayonet-bills, and eaten.
But their assailants blown with greed
Were seized, after the hottest chase,
By hounds of an Eo-Irish race,
And terriers of a Gallic breed.
And the sun went down upon the sight
Of bison worsted by becunas,
Of foxes putting sharks to flight
And weasels at the throats of tunas.
Along the shore from tip to tip,
This interlocking battle grip
Relaxed only as either side
Gave ground with flow and ebb of tide;
For all were pledged, with teeth and claws,
To racial blood and comradeship,
Devoted to the national cause
And loyal to the boundary strip.

In one swift hour when the night
Was far advanced, the Saurian,
By some half-blinded route, began
To scent the issue of the fight.
Throughout the day he did not know
Which was his ally or his foe;
Beyond the blue lagoon he waded
Where sluggish alligators hid
Behind a sand-spit, and invaded
The rocky strongholds of the squid.
With his steep claws he rent apart
Amphibia along the shore,
And wandering farther out, he tore
Pelagic mammals to the heart.
He followed up a narwhal, wedged

Him dry upon the Gumra shoals,
Left him with twenty streaming holes
From twelve-inch canines double-edged.
Then back upon his tracks he wheeled,
Floundered through the littoral mud,
Entered the battle zone and reeled
Through mounting sloughs of flesh and blood,
Scattering a full hyæna pack
That hung all day upon his track
Along the freshly swollen moors,
Wondering how their nostrils missed
The secret of those bloody spoors
Left by the alien Atavist.
Fish and land animals alike
Were objects for his fangs to strike;
Elephants and jungle cats
Met the same fate as hares and rats;
Beneath his horned, gigantic toes
Camels went down and buffaloes;
And wild cats were so many fleas
That tickled him below the knees.
But when the evening wore to night
Gorillas under cover hit him
With flying stones, and cave bears bit him;
A flock of eagles bleared his sight
With beak and claw; a downy pack
Of monkeys in a sycamore
Swung downward by their tails and tore
The scaly armour from his back.
The bravest lions in the ranks
Buried their teeth into his hocks;
From hemlock crotches and from rocks,
Tigers leaping on his shanks
Gouged deeply with insistent claws
And dropped with flitches in their jaws.
Then from this unremitting stress
Came the sure touch of weariness;
A pulse of apprehension dim
Of what this struggle double-faced
Might in the outcome mean to him.

Perhaps some inland desert taste
During the slaughter of the camels,
Taught him his kinship with the lizard,
His blood-removal from the mammals,
And gave him nausea at the gizzard.
Perhaps in some sharp way it sprang
From the reminiscent tang
Of salt sea water on his muzzle,
The moment that he stooped and took
The narwhal's blood as from a brook
With one inebriating guzzle.
Something in his racial birth,
At variance with the things of Earth,—
A tidal call that beat like pain
From spinal ganglion to brain—
Now made him shake his foes aside,
And leave the battle's desperate zone,
And wander off to climb alone
A promontory where the tide
Sounded its nocturnal flow
A sheer three hundred feet below.
He cleared the base, his body fagged,
And clambered on from shard to shard,
Pausing, jibbing, breathing hard.
Under his weight his knee-caps sagged;
Bleeding fast from fissures torn
By tiger fang and rhino horn,
He groped and stumbled up until
He reached a level granite sill;
Raw fillets hanging from his thighs,
He sank a moment faint with pain;
Chaos was closing on his eyes,
When the voice of the sea-god called again,
Far across the water,—"Ex—
Saurian of the Pleiocene,
Blind wanderer from the race marine,
TYRANNOSAUROS REX!"
Starting sharply from his swoon,
He stood upright, his figure set
Black like a poplar's silhouette

Against the orb of an inflamed moon.
And once again from a crystal bell,
Oceanus wove his spell;
Sounding like a three-fold ring,
Steepled in the crimson surge,
It tolled . . .
"TYRANNOSAUROS!
TYRANNOSAUROS!
TYRANNOSAUROS KING!"
The lizard staggered to the verge,
Looked into the water's face,
The rolling cradle of his race,
Brooded a moment as he hung
Over the crag-holds wearily,
And with the final echo, flung
His body to the Austral Sea.

Wilder than the maddest rout,
Madder than the wildest roar,
A storm of rage unknown before
Followed 'Tyrannus' passing out.
The dark unreason of his mind,
Read in promiscuous assault
Upon the land and ocean kind,
Had placed the agreement in default.
But through the day, the immediate sight
Of a teeming and aggressive sea
Enforced the covenantal right
Against a mutual enemy;
Kept in abeyance blood desires
As veteran as Jurassic fires.
Now under cover of the night
When many of their ranks had died
Of virus from the saurian's bite,
The leash of discipline was untied,
And soon the full abysmal sound
Broke out in internecine notes
From all the brutes on fighting ground
Feeling for each other's throats.
So piercing was the central cry

It carried to the southward high
Over the foothills to the crests
Of the snowy Guadeleras, waking
The æries of the eagles; shaking
The condors from their craggy nests.
Then by a fierce contagion carried
East and west to either tip
Of the Isthmian sea-board, it was harried
Into ten thousand shards;—the rip
Of lion's claws on buffalo hides;
Of ivory through the lions' sides;
The grunt of a bush hog or the squeal
Of a babyroussa with the pounce
Of an infuriated ounce;
Of leopards crushed beneath the kneel
Of battle-wearied elephants;
The growls of bears; the dissonance
Of fleeing, howling allouattes
Pursued by cheetahs; of wild cats
Nine-lived and strung in endless knots
Upon the backs of Cashmir ewes,
Or arguing with ocelots
The fallen bodies of kangaroos.
And now and then the storm would rise
To unimaginable cries,
As though a stubborn racial note,
Goaded to the bitter-full,
Had baulked within the cosmic throat.
And yet the scale, for all this woe,
Had still a higher note to go.

All through the day,—in throaty pant
Of steam and pulmonary moan,
Being full of slag, the stridulant
Jurania, like a surly crone,
Had growled about a deeper pain,
Caused by an old Silurian sprain.
By dusk, her fetid breath had grown
Into a thick revolving cone.
And as the minutes passed, a flash,—

An incandescent fork of blue,
And now of green would struggle through
The smothering pall of smoke and ash,
Until with undulating sheet
Of multi-coloured flame that beat
The blank face of the sky apart,—
Just as the last convulsive stroke
Unthrottled the volcano's heart,—
The storm flood of the lava broke.
It shot a fifteen thousand feet
Straight to the sky, then billowing higher,
And outward, made as if to meet
Its own maternal stellar fire
With tenuous play of finger streaks;
But failing in its vaunted leap,
Returned with frenzied haste to sweep
Across the Guadelera peaks;
Inundate the valleys; glut
The plains and canyons; rise and shut
The higher gorges, rifts and caves
Of the mountains; overflow and roll
Seaward with tumbling lava waves
Over the great Juranian bowl.
It blazed the forest pines and passed
The northern stretch of cliffs until,
Clearing the summit and the last
Excoriated ridge and hill,
It poured its fury on the dead;
Then the inexorable blast,
Capping the horrors of the night,
Pursued the living remnants, bled
To the final pulses with the fight,
And caught them as they tried to flee
To the drowning mercies of the sea.

Far to the East,—from all this dire
Titanic strife of claw and fire,
The only fighter to escape,—
The female anthropoidal ape!
By subtle powers that placed her head

Of land belligerents, she, alone,
Had often turned to watch with dread
The beat of catastrophic power,
In cloud and thunder, as the cone
Ticked off her last Aeonian hour.
She sniffed the warning just in time,
Before the extinction throe, to reach
The forest heights that flanked the beach.
She took the eastern headland climb,
And then turned southward from the sea,
Shambling upward wearily,
Ever on the chasing fringe
Of the lava that, with hideous twist
Of myriad anacondas, hissed
And spat out fiery tongues to singe
Her hair. Gaining the summit where
Water breezes cooled the air,
She paused a moment to endure
The scene survived, her eyes aglow
Held first by the mesmeric lure
Of globes of vivid indigo
That danced and burst as they were thrown
From the deep labour of the cone,
And then by that which choked her breath
And dazed her brain,—the molten red
Of plain and ridge on which were spread
The incredulities of death,
Riding on tumultuously
In a gulf of fire to the sea.
Under the shelter of the height,
She gathered up her residue
Of will to blot out from her view
The awful fiction of the night,
And take upon herself the strain
Of the descent. By swinging, crawling,
Running in little spurts and falling,
Splay-footed, shoulders crooked with pain,
She reached a shallow river-bed
Winding through a moor which led
Her to a grove of sandalwood.

There, at the hollow of a tree,
She found her lair, and brokenly
She entered in, cuddling her brood
To withered paps; and in the hush
Of the laggard hours as the flush
Of dawn burnt out the coppery tones
That smeared the unfamiliar West,
The heralds of the day were moans,
And croons, and drummings of the breast.

E. J. Pratt: A Major Contemporary Poet

— 1 —

As John Crowe Ransom expressed it in a recent issue of *The Kenyon Review,* "In thinking of a poet as Major", we inevitably "assume . . . the criteria which will occur to everybody. His deliverances should be of vital human importance, and produced rather consistently in some volume, for there is a quantitative as well as a qualitative side to this order of greatness; but produced freshly rather than repetitiously, so that he will need large resources, both technical and imaginative.". These are the criteria, but they will, of course, be subject to different interpretation by different people: we are not all going to agree, for example, in what constitutes the "vital human importance" of a poetry. My claim that E. J. Pratt is a "major contemporary poet" — that he ranks with Frost and Eliot and the small group of major poets in the century — must, therefore, be tested by the reader himself. I will feel satisfied if some readers are led to examine the poetry in the light of the remarks which follow. The claim that Pratt is a major poet, or at least a poet of marked significance, is not, of course, a new one. It has often been made by critics in Canada, where he has been regarded for two decades or more as our "leading contemporary poet", and by a small group of writers and critics in the United States — including the late W. R. Benet, who contributed a foreword to Pratt's *Collected Poems,* and the Columbia professor, H. W. Wells, who collaborated with Carl Klinck in the book, *E. J. Pratt: the Man and his Poetry.* But my interpretation is relatively new and it springs from a belief that the prevailing view — the view that Pratt is an "heroic poet" — is seriously limited and ultimately misleading. When we consider how highly Pratt has sometimes been praised in the United States and how slight the effect has been on American critical opinion as a whole (his name, so far as I know, does not appear in any comprehensive collection or survey of contemporary poetry published in America*), we may well wonder whether the typical presentation of his

* His poems may be found in several American anthologies of a special kind, including **The Eternal Sea** and **The Literary Tradition.**

work has not done him a very real disservice. It would be strange if one of the most original and most thoroughly contemporary of poets were almost unknown in the world of contemporary American letters, but that, in effect, seems to be the case.

No critic, of course, imagines that the term, "heroic poet," applies to Pratt in a strictly formal sense. The heroic poet of tradition has always written of the wars of his peoples, whether they were wars against the "monster" or against the human enemy, and he has celebrated the feats of the national heroes: Pratt has produced only one poem — the short narrative of *Dunkirk* — which could possibly be labeled heroic in this sense, and it is notable that *Dunkirk* describes the retreat of a beaten army before a vastly superior force. I believe that our recurrent wars have exerted a great indirect influence on the body of his work, but when he has dealt with war directly in other poems — in *The Submarine. A Fable of the Goats* or *The Great Feud* — he has scarcely done so in the traditionally heroic manner. Nevertheless, since nearly all his narratives involve some great conflict between man, or man's creations, and the forces of nature — such as the whaling episode described *In The Cachalot* or the famous marine disaster re-told in *The Titanic* — the critics say that he remains basically heroic in temper and attitude. In the opinion of the late E. K. Brown, "The originality of *The Cachalot,* as of *The Titanic,* lies first, then, in the exaltation that Pratt experiences in the mere existence before his imagination of supreme strength. It is this that critics are trying to express when they call him 'epic' or 'heroic'." And Brown went on to say that "In the presence of strength Pratt feels pleasure as well as awe; there is very little terror in Pratt's world, and the reader never feels small in it; his pictures of strength release one from the petty round and make one feel the ally, not the victim — as with Jeffers, whom he warmly admires — of universal power". Now I am not sure that when the critics call Pratt heroic, they always mean exactly what Brown says they mean. There are critics who will stress Pratt's concern with human heroism, rather than, as Brown does, with the heroic aspect of nature, but, while the emphasis may differ, they are nearly all agreed that he is concerned with strength and with the celebration of strength. It is this conception of his work which we have to consider, if we are to understand the limitation of Pratt criticism.

Now it is obvious that the general view applies to an important aspect of the poetry: there is no doubt that Pratt is concerned, in part at least, with what Professor Brown calls "universal power", and that he often perceives and expresses power in heroic terms. The trouble is that

when the critics elevate the part-truth to the status of the whole truth, they distort the poet's intention in a fundamental way. They commit two sins of omission. In the first place, they fail to realise that the idea of power in Pratt's poetry, so far from being of one simple kind, is extremely complex and ambiguous. If he expresses an heroic "exaltation in the presence of supreme strength" — which he does — then it is also true, though it is paradoxical, that he expresses a sense of terror at the destructive implications of such strength: he constantly reveals an ironic awareness of the interrelation of these two contrasting aspects of "supreme strength". At the same time he conceives of power as a single principle. Despite the deceptive surface of his narratives, and his deceptive choice of materials, once we grasp their dominant symbolism we see that he is less concerned with a conflict between man and nature than he is with a principle of "universal power" which, if it does not dominate the whole of human nature, still manifests itself in man and nature in ways which are generally parallel. Power is universal in extent; it may be greater than man: yet because man is a complex creation, its human expression has a special interest an dsignificance. Contrary to the opinion of Professor Brown, who suggests time and again that there is something quite inhuman about his poet, I think it is obvious that Pratt is deeply concerned wih the social and the psychological expressions of power. (The one critic to understand this fact — and the only critic to challenge the heroic point of view — is Professor Northrop Frye, who once wrote that "The unconscious horror of nature and the subconscious horror of the mind thus coincide [in Pratt]: this amalgamation is the basis of symbolism on which nearly all [his] work is founded" — a statement which exaggerates the sense of terror in the poetry, but which, I may say here, has influenced the writing of the present article.) Indeed, the poet is so deeply concerned with the mental phenomenon, with the workings of power in the subconscious mind, that there is a distinct psychological cast to his thought as a whole. There is a strong vein of materialism in Pratt's psychology, yet he tends to view even the material world with the eyes of the psychologist. He treats the conflict of power in nature somewhat as a conflict and exchange of related motives.

That, then, is my initial objection to the heroic point of view: it distorts the poet's idea of power by stressing only one aspect of it, failing in the process to grasp its ambiguity, its essential unity and its psychological significance. It falls into this error out of an overweening conscience. It assumes that the poet views the whole of life from an ethical standpoint and that he is mainly concerned with a contest between good

and evil power, The hero conquers an evil power in nature or displays such heroism in defeat that his moral victory is assured. Even when, as in Professor Brown's interpretation, the heroic element is seen in nature rather than man, "the reader feels himself the ally, and not . . . the victim of universal power": he is said to regard the power of nature as a sovereign cure, a universal good. In point of fact, while there is an ethical element in the poet's idea of power, and while a distinction is usually made in the poems between good and evil power, there is a much stronger sense of the interdependence of its contrasting expressions and of its underlying unity. The possibility of ethical action, even of the rule of ethics, is never eliminated, for man is too complex to be understood solely in terms of power, but the predominant view is that of the scientist and, finally, of the psychologist. It is strange that in all the critical discussion of Pratt's interest in science, of the influence of various sciences on his work, so little mention is ever made of psychology. Pratt studied and taught psychology at Toronto University for nearly a dozen years, at a time when that science was dominated by the "physiological psychology" of Wilhelm Wundt, the man who is sometimes described as the predecessor of Freud. The stamp of Wundt's "experimental method" is evident on those many passages in the poetry in which psychological speculation is conducted in physiological terms — whether the psychological interest is made explicit, as in a short poem such an *Autopsy on a Sadist,* or left to implication as in the description of the whale's anatomy in *The Cachalot.* While I can claim only a casual acquaintance with Wundt's writings — which cover a wide variety of topics ranging from psychology to metaphysics — and I imagine it might be extremely misleading to identify him with a philosophy of power, nevertheless he sometimes reveals the preoccupation with power which is characteristic of German thought. In this respect his influence on Pratt may be both direct and indirect. The view that human life is continuous though not identical with nature, which underlies Pratt's conception of power, probably owes as much to Wundt as it does to Darwin. There is no element of metaphysics in Pratt's thought, yet his leading concept provides some parallel with the power of divinty (in the course of his development it tends to replace the idea of God, as I shall attempt to show later in this article), and here it is worth nothing that Wundt conceived of the "god-idea" as a fusion of the "hero" with the "demon". It is precisely a fusion of the heroic with the demoniac that characterizes Pratt's idea of power. In folklore the demon is usually associated with a particular place or a natural setting — such as the sea: the hero of course, personifies human

attributes. Perhaps it is significant, then, that the typical Pratt narrative is set upon the sea, and that its story and its symbolism often seem at cross-purposes: the story describes a conflict between human and natural power, man and sea, "hero" and "demon" — a conflict which is in part illusory, for the symbolism reveals their submerged likeness and tends to effect a fusion of the two protagonists. However, I do not wish to overemphasize this suggestion. I offer it — and the thought of Wundt's influence on Pratt — to the first M. A. student who reads this article and knows a good thesis when he sees one.*

Apart from its narrow definition of power, there is a second major objection to the heroic point of view: it either ignores, or fails to appreciate, the poet's depth of compassion. Professor Brown is so preoccupied with the "harshness" of Pratt's temperament that he actually goes to the length of saying that "there is very little tenderness" in his work. That is surely an amazing judgment: granted the deceptively harsh surface of the longer narratives, there is still a sizeable group of personal lyrics — such poems as *The Drowing* or *Blind* — in which the tenderness of feeling is so moving as to be almost painful. And one wonders how Professor Brown can have failed to take into account the poet's magnificent elegy on the death of his mother, *The Iron Door.* He was, presumably, caught in the trammels of his own argument, but one fails to perceive the logical necessity: Professor Brown himself mentions Jeffers in the passage I quoted above, and in Jeffers as in Pratt, one encounters the familiar paradox of a surface harshness combined with an acute sensitivity to pain. If power is the dominant idea of Pratt's poetry, then compassion is certainly its deepest feeling: indeed, of the two main elements, the latter is probably the more fundamental. That is not to say that the sense of compassion, as it is realized in the major poems, is equated with "sympathy", or treated primarily in an ethical way, or regarded simply as the conqueror of power. Pratt is an advocate of tolerance and love in a number of shorter poems, and they are an important part of his *ethical* teaching, but the significance of compassion for him is essentially of a mystical kind. It is the one emotion or experience to which he seems prepared to accord the quality of divinity, and as I shall attempt to show in my biographical analysis, it preserves a chief link between his mature thought and his early religious training. It is through compassion, he would seem to say, that we find the power to bear, and finally to accept the world-drama of power, and thus, while compassion stands apart from

* The influence of William James (especially his **Principles of Psychology** and **Varieties of Religious Experience)** is also very considerable.

power, it attains its highest expression in the presence of great violence and destruction. That, I believe, is the significance of the lyric *From Stone to Steel:*

From stone to bronze, from bronze to steel
Along the road-dust of the sun,
Two revolutions of the wheel
From Java to Geneva run.

The snarl Neanderthal is worn
Close to the smiling Aryan lips,
The civil polish of the horn
Gleams from our praying finger tips.

The evolution of desire
Has but matured a toxic wine,
Drunk long before its heady fire
Reddened Euphrates or the Rhine.

Between the temple and the cave
The boundary lies tissue-thin:
The yearlings still the altars crave
As satisfaction for a sin.

The road goes up, the road goes down —
Let Java or Geneva be —
But whether to the cross or crown
The path lies through Gethsemane.

Here it is significant that the symbol chosen is Gethsemane and not the cross itself:compassion is to be found, not in the act of sacrifice, but in the moment of contemplation and acceptance of all that power in the world may mean. That, I believe, is the deepest meaning of Pratt's three major poems — *The Titanic, The Cachalot* and *The Great Feud* — and of the main body of his work.

— 2 —

Although Professor Brown speaks very highly of *The Titanic,* Pratt's re-telling of the famous disaster of 1912, when the fastest and largest liner afloat was sunk by an iceberg on its maiden voyage, he

makes no attempt to analyse the poem in detail in his short essay in *On Canadian Poetry.* To what extent is he correct in saying that its "originality lies . . . in the exaltation which Pratt experience . . . before supreme strength"? The choice of narrative material — a collision between a giant ship and an iceberg — would seen to bear him out in part. These inanimate protagonists receive greater attention than the crew and passengers of the ship, and at least in the early part of the poem, they seem to provide a focus for what he calls the poet's "delight in strength". And one would have to agree that even in the conclusion of *The Titanic,* after the collision has occurred and the ship is about to go down with most of its passengers still aboard, the horror of that situation is not exploited to the full. The example of human heroism, and the immense forces involved, both serve in part — though only in part — to reduce the impact of the tragedy. There is no real catharsis, no full emotional release for the reader, but we would have to agree at least that he is not made to feel "the *victim* of universal power". And yet, if Professor Brown is right in part, surely his interpretation does not apply to the poem as a whole. It is also true that *The Titanic* is a masterpiece of suspense. It evokes a feeling of terror, no less strong than the feeling of delight, which grows in intensity up to the moment of the collision, diminishes as the ship slowly sinks and the full import of the tragedy is revealed, yet assumes the ascendancy in the final lines of the poem:

> And out there in the starlight, with no trace
> Upon it of its deed but the last wave
> From the *Titanic* fretting at its base,
> Silent, composed, ringed by its icy broods.
> The gray shape with the palaeolithic face
> Was still the master of the longitudes.

In short, the emotional content of *The Titanic* has the ambiguity common to Pratt's work as a whole: it holds these contrasting feelings, of terror and delight, in an ironic balance which is varied with great subtlety but never substantially changed.

But, again, is Professor Brown right in assuming that the poet is mainly concerned with a conflict between man and nature — with such a resolution of that conflict that the reader is "made to feel the *ally,* and not . . . the victim of universal power"? What is the real theme of the poem and what are its intellectual implications? The answer is to be found in a description of the iceberg, which is placed in a strategic

position early in the poem and which is in effect a statement of the poet's intention. It is a passage so significant in Pratt's work as a whole that I will quote it here in full:

> Calved from a glacier near Godhaven coast,
> It left the fiord for the sea — a host
> Of white flotillas gathering in its wake,
> And joined by fragments from a Behring floe,
> Had circumnavigated it to make
> It centre of an archipelago.
> Its lateral motion on the Davis Strait
> Was casual and indeterminate,
> And each advance to southward was as blind
> As each recession to the north. No smoke
> Of steamships nor the hoist of mainsails broke
> The polar wastes — no sounds except the grind
> Of ice, the cry of curlews and the lore
> Of winds from mesas of eternal snow;
> Until caught by the western undertow,
> It struck the current of the Labrador
> Which swung it to its definite southern stride.
> Pressure and glacial time had stratified
> The berg to the consistency of flint,
> And kept inviolate, through clash of tide
> And gale, facade and columns with their hint
> Of inward altars and of steepled bells
> Ringing the passage of the parallels.
> But when with months of voyaging it came
> To where both streams — the Gulf and Polar — met,
> The sun which left its crystal peaks aflame
> In the sub-arctic noons, began to fret
> The arches, flute the spires and deform
> The features, till the batteries of storm,
> Playing above the slow-eroding base,
> Demolished the last temple touch of grace.
> Another month, and nothing but the brute
> And palaeolithic outline of a face
> Fronted the transatlantic shipping route.
> A sloping spur that tapered to a claw
> And lying twenty feet below had made

It lurch and shamble like a plantigrade;
But with an impulse governed by the raw
Mechanics of its birth, it drifted where
Ambushed, fog-gray, it stumbled on its lair,
North forty-one degrees and forty-four,
Fifty and fourteen west the longitude,
Waiting a world-memorial hour, its rude
Corundum form stripped to its Greenland core.

There is a greater complexity here than Professor Brown would lead us to expect. There are three distinct levels of meaning in the passage. The iceberg is a symbol, first, of the creative and destructive power of nature: it begins its journey as an object of magnificence and beauty, but is gradually transformed into an engine of destruction. It is a symbol of that same power expressed in human society: it appears first as an image of religious aspiration, as a giant sea-cathedral, "Of inward altars and of steepled bells/Ringing the passage of the parallels", and then, reaching its rendezvous with The Titanic, "shambles" like a "plantigrade" and lies in "ambush" for its foe. Finally, since only a fraction of its bulk is visible and the rest is hidden beneath the surface of the water, it becomes an accurate symbol of power in the individual mind: of the aspiring hopes which find their reflection in the conscious will, and of the destructive (and self-destructive) motives which lurk in the subconscious but eventually express themselves in overt and conscious form. Now the question is whether this symbolism is given an ethical significance and whether the apparent conflict between creative and destructive power is seen as a conflict between good and evil? The answer is partly in the affirmative: the contrast between the first appearance of the iceberg in its marvellous order and symmetry, and its disintegration into the melodramatic image of a "claw", is certainly meant to carry an ethical import. But while the ethical consideration is fully acknowledged, it is embraced in a larger and more ambiguous context of meaning: the final effect of the passage is to suggest that the creative and destructive forms of power, embodied as they are in a single object, are expressions of the same principle and inherently related to one another. There is for example, an ethical distinction between reason and instinct, between conscious "good" and subconscious "evil", but that distinction is resumed in a sense of the interplay of conscious and subconscious force and of the unity of the mind's power. Reason may hold the initiative for good: instinct may be its source. Reason suggests the possibility of controlling destructive power,

but reason may also assume its direction.

The iceberg is the chief symbol of the poem, and once we grasp its significance we are able to see that the collision between the two great protagonists, the surface conflict between man and nature, is of less concern to the poet than the bonds which draw them together. The ship and the iceberg may seem to represent at first the two poles of creative and destructive power, but the poem exists to prove that they are almost identical symbols. The ship, too, undergoes a gradual transformation, appearing first in all its size and magnificence, and then, when the tragedy occurs and it begins to sink, suffering "deformity of line... Emergent like a crag out of the sea". Its symbolism is realized on the same three levels of meaning: it is shown as a natural creation — "The power pulsing through its lungs and heart"; it represents social power and achievement — its engines are a marvel of the machine age and its interior decorations resume several centuries of European art; and, finally and most important, it expresses a psychological dualism — its passengers include the elite of an intellectual and upper class, the finest products of European consciousness, and yet it sails to its doom, in the face of ill omens and warnings of disaster, as surely as if it were impelled by some deep wish for its own destruction. It is the psychological meaning that grows more important as the poem develops and the relation between the ship and iceberg is made quite explicit: we see that the destructive base of the iceberg, with its "claw" lying hidden in the water, merely reflects the subconscious impulse which carries those who sail and travel on the ship to their own destruction. In this respect it is important to note that *The Titanic* was written and published in the mid-thirties, when the threat of war was already evident, and that it recounts a sensational disaster which, occurring in 1912, seemed ominous to the popular mind of the war approaching then. The poem is a comment on the age of the machine, the age in which industrial power produces wondrous abundance and precipitates self-destructive wars. The ship sinks below the surface of the sea, into the dark of the subconscious deprived of reason, as modern society threatens to sink in war.

The Titanic, of course, is not a *prophecy* of the destruction of modern society. Pratt's poems can never be reduced to a neat paraphrase: their method is irony; they are never amenable to optimist or pessimist. The death of the great ship is an evil omen, but it is not the seal of fate. It suggests that the modern balance of power, between the creative and destructive aspects of the machine, is a precarious one: it does not show us the balance overthrown. Nor, if the destruction were

to occur, is there any implication that it would be final. Pratt does not view history as a straight line of progression, but rather as a series of cycles. That view is enunciated in a number of the shorter poems, such as *From Stone to Steel,* and it is quite clearly implied in the symbolism of *The Titanic.* Indeed, the same distinction which is made in the short poem I have mentioned, between the ages of stone and steel, may be discovered in the symbols of the steel ship and the iceberg (the berg is said to have "the consistency of flint"). But while the two symbols establish a partial contrast, they also mirror the same process of cycles of change: the iceberg declines from its pinnacle of glory to the "shambling plantigrade" and the "claw"; when it meets the *Titanic,* the ship, which has just achieved its maximum speed and efficency, begins the same process of decline. Perhaps this world-view is influenced by Spengler, but it is a natural result of the duality of the poet's vision.

Yet the depth and range of this great poem cannot be wholly explained in terms of its vision of social or psychological forces. The life-and-death of the ship is described in a way which is both more personal and more universal in its significance. The ship, in its prime, seems to mirror our own energy and our own hope. Its death occurs almost in the literal sense of the word: as it gradually inclines towards the water, as its great salons are deserted and their lights begin to dim and go out, we feel or imagine we are witnessing the slow withdrawal of consciousness from someone who is dying. Perhaps it is the personal element of the poem that explains its power to move us so profoundly — that and the fact that the poet seems to have experienced or known the whole pageant of life-and-death and to have accepted it at length with profound compassion. It is because the poem communicates such compassion that the reader himself is able to achieve, not the catharsis of emotional release, but a degree of resignation before the universal processes. In the final analysis, it is compassion which is the vital element in the narrative of *The Titanic.*

— 3 —

The Titanic is a representative Pratt poem, in the sense that it depends on the balance of creative with destructive power which is characteristic of nearly all his narratives. His major work on war, *The Great Feud; A Dream of a Pleiocene Armageddon,* (an account of a prehistoric feud between the life of the land and sea) is at least a partial exception. In this poem the phenomenon of power is seen as almost wholly destruct-

ive: its beauty and grace exist only in the light of destruction or as pale emanations in the after-glow of armageddon. I would rank *The Great Feud* beside *The Titanic* on a level slightly above *The Cachalot*. It is not only Pratt's most original poem but an achievement unique in contemporary poetry. Although our recurrent wars have exerted an enormous influence on the development of twentieth century poetry, it is notable that that influence has been mainly indirect and has grown increasingly so — as witness the difference in quality and quantity of the war poetry produced during the first and second world wars. War is now so omniprescent, so inhuman a force, as to be almost inaccessible to poetry. To find the proper correlative, to recreate this inhuman phenomenon on a grand scale and with unflagging power, yet with a full sense of its horror and with a great depth of compassion: that has seemed virtually impossible in contemporary poetry. I believe that enormous task has been accomplished by E. J. Pratt in *The Great Feud.*

No poem is more deceptive in its irony. The light and even playful tone is dominant through the first two-thirds of the narrative and is never wholly absent even after the eruption of feeling occurs as the battle reaches its height. The apparently inconsequential manner, and the delay of emotional release, both greatly increase the intensity of *The Great Feud,* but they also have the incidental effect of rendering it extremely difficult of interpretation. It has been called "a parable of the suicidal waste of war". The elements of fable are present — in the "female anthropoidal ape", the congress of land-animals, their use of military tactics and so on — and there is a deep and overpowering hatred of war in the poem. Yet the interpretation is hardly adequate. The kind of exactness and clarity which we associate with the fable is totally lacking in *The Great Feud.* Apart from the ape, the animals in the poem have no precise individual significance and cannot be separated from the multitude: while they are faithfully regarded and described in some detail, they are much more like creatures of dream than of external reality. Nor can the purpose be mainly didactic: the very violence of the battle-scenes is enough to dissuade us of that. It would seem that the allegorical aspect of the poem serves chiefly as background, as the sign of its ultimate social significance, and that its didactic element, however real, is subordinate to some larger context of meaning.

At the outset, I believe one must recognize that the content of *The Great Feud* is personal and that its method is introspective. I believe there are few poems in English which are so nakedly honest and so relentless in their self-revelation. *The Great Feud* is subtitled *A Dream*

of a Pleiocene Armageddon: it is a dream both in the sense that its fantasies of violence are cast up from the dream-world, from the depth of the subconscious, and in the sense that it presents these fantasies as a form of wish-fulfillment. There may be readers who will recognise this fact, consciously or unconsciously and who will at some point be repelled and put the poem away. No one who lacks a certain stamina, a certain courage, should endeavour to read the poem beyond the point where the battle-orgies begin. Yet, while the poem is so intensely personal — or perhaps because of this fact — we are at length made to recognize ourselves and to see our own image reflected in it. Indeed, if there are few poems which are more profoundly introspective, there are not many which are more completely objective or more universal in their significance. It is this capacity to objectify the most personal material that is one of the marks of a major poet, and it is a capacity which Pratt displays in the highest degree in *The Great Feud.*

Two principal themes are raised on the personal base of the poem. The first, and less significant in *The Great Feud,* is the conflict and interaction of reason with instinct. Reason is personified by the forces of the land — or at least by their leader, the creature who first employs it, the "female anthropoidal ape" — and instinct by the forces which defend and emerge from the sea. We are told that the relation between the conscious and subconscious mind is characterized in part — though only in part — by conflict. Of its own accord, the subconscious would periodically erupt in violence; but reason, an accident of evolution, introduces a new mental factor. Reason has attributes peculiar to itself. Its possessor, the female ape, is a brooding creature. She is led to think and worry about herself; and that may be a step in the right direction. She is also made conscious of pain: it is possible, then, that self-interest may sometime force her to curb violence. She is able to command the other animals, to dictate the form and control the direction of violence, and so it is possible that she may be able to direct the instincts into non-violent channels. Had she thought a little harder at the right time, had she pursued to its logical conclusion her idea that the greatest crime was to harm one's own kind and seen that her own kind included the potential enemy, then she might have prevented the feud from getting out of hand; and, since she is the sole survivor of armageddon, it is always possible that she will yet do so. Yet if reason has this potential power, it is still only a late expression of the evolutionary process and it is involved with the earlier world of spontaneous violence. Reason is not to be equated with "good" nor instinct with "bad". We cannot repress or deny ex-

pression to the instincts with impunity: if we try to do so, we destroy the self or we pave the way for greater violence. The creatures of instinct, though they are often ferocious, have an innocent charm which is denied the reasoning ape. The possessor of reason may, in her new-found sophistication, invent more terrible forms of violence and dedicate herself to their execution. She may set the stage for armageddon, touch off the holocaust, and then, by a lucky break which may not happen again, escape it herself by the skin of her teeth.

It may be more difficult to grasp and appreciate the dimensions of the major theme of the poem: the relation between violence and compassion. The lust of conflict is described at such length and with such brilliance — and, in the culminating scenes, in such ecstatic tones — that we may have to re-read the poem before we appreciate both its naked honest and its depth of compassion. But then, certainly, we see how the violence described is all of one kind and how it all conforms to the one exacting pattern: it is always a violence done to the feeling of compassion. Violence is everywhere in contrast with the symbols of family, of parenthood and of birth. The chief instigator of the feud is the "female anthropoidal ape": "To hide her young, to fight or climb/She was the cleverest of her time". She finds a pretext for war, after observing the fate of an alligator who had "killed and eaten up her youngest born" and so deducing "the raw/Material of the moral law". Gathering the animals together, she expounds the new creed. She explains to the congress that the greatest crime is to do harm to one's own kind; she exhorts them to avenge the destruction inflicted on their females and their young by the creatures of the sea; and at the same time she warns them that a "great crusade" may degenerate into an "internecine feud" and abjures them to be spartan and refrain from devouring their own kind until the hour of battle has arrived. Yet the parties to the feud are themselves blood-relatives. Many of the land-animals have but lately made the move from the sea to land, and among the sea-animals, there are those who are preparing for the change. When the battle comes, the land-and sea-versions of the same species are pitted one against the other, and they are obliged to demonstrate their kinship in amphibious combat. The blood-relation of the warring parties is epitomized by the great dinosaur, the throwback to an earlier age when the division between land-and sea-life was barely drawn. His power for destruction is greater than any of the combattants. He attacks and destroys both the land-and the sea-forces, until in the end, exhausted by his own orgies, he gives his body to the sea in response to some blood-memory of the past. His death removes

the last vestige of restraint from the forces of the land, who engage in a furious internecine conflict until they are interrupted by the down-pouring of the volcano. The symbolic pattern in maintained to the end of the poem. The volcano is "Jurania with her crater jaw"; she is in "deep labour" as she disgorges her lava; and she throws up flame which seeks to meet "Its own maternal stellar fire/With tenuous play of finger streaks." In the final scene the ape returns "brokenly" to her lair and begins to suckle her young.

The symbol of birth, in use throughout the poem, has a special and rather ambiguous significance. It enables the poet to demonstrate the kinship of the warring animals, since their evolutionary origin or "birth" is ultimately the same, but it also enables him to establish a new distinction between land and sea. The process of birth, of bearing in labour, is known to the animals of the land but not to the animals of the sea. Hence it is the animals of the land who prize birth and the family ties it encourages: the ape who insists that the greatest crime is to injure one's own kind, has no counterpart among her enemies in the sea. The physical process of birth will, in the course of history, become a source of religious symbolism: it does so in the Christian faith, in the symbol of mother and child. If the significance of birth is understood in its widest sense, as it is in this Christian symbol, then it becomes the basis of genuine compassion. The possibility of compassion is inherent in the creatures of the land. Had the ape pursued her logic far enough, she might have seen that "her own kind" included the enemy: she might have done so if she had not been misled by a false sympathy, by her preoccupation with her own ego, and if her powers of reason had been reinforced by compassion. Man might still do so — yet there is no guarantee. Compassion is a personal revelation, and it cannot be a crusading force: it is the paradox that we cannot be free of violence and cruelty until we have accepted their power in ourselves and in the world. That, I believe, is the deepest meaning of *The Great Feud.* Compassion emerges in the poem with the death of the dinosaur, the creature who is capable of the greatest destruction, and it is fully revealed when the creature who is responsible for armageddon returns to her lair and her young.

— 4 —

The Great Feud and *The Cachalot* were published in a single volume, *Titans,* in 1926. *The Cachalot* has been much discussed and highly praised, but I would rate it slightly below *The Great Feud.* While it

contains the most memorable single passage in all Pratt's work — the battle of the whale and the kraken — it has neither the sustained intensity nor the unflagging verbal brilliance of its companion piece. It is also less beautifully proportioned. It falls into three parts which are imperfectly related: the birth and rearing of the whale; its conquest of the kraken; and its pyrrhic victory over the crew of a whaler. The second part is the natural climax of *The Cachalot.* The third part is the longest of the three, and while it has narrative power and reaches a magnificent conclusion, it adds very little to the emotional and intellectual content of the poem. It could very well stand alone. In contrast with the other sections, with their suggestion of the fable, it is a symbolic composition in the manner of *The Roosevelt and the Antinoe* of 1930 and of the later narratives generally. On the whole, *The Cachalot* is less careful and less studied than *The Great Feud,* and it is interesting to note that it was written at the earlier date.

The Cachalot has been the source of real critical confusion. Professor Brown believes that it exhibits Pratt's love of supreme strength, "the primitive overpowering the intellectual" — the "primitive" being represented by the whale and the "intellectual" by the crew of the whaler (he does not take account of the fact that the whale, in overpowering the whaler, overpowers itself: if they stand for the primitive and the intellectual, then it is no-contest). H. W. Wells, co-author with Carl Klinck of *E. J. Pratt: the Man and his Poetry,* offers quite another interpretation, suggesting "That both whale and the entire crew of the sailors go down to extinction, points to the already discussed teleological view that with the death of human consciousness and the human race the power, beauty, evil and good of nature must in a sense perish also". These interpretations are perhaps not as contradictory as they sound, and I believe that they are both true of certain aspects of *The Cachalot* — one of the most complex and least explicit of poems. I do not believe they are true of the poet's main intention, and I am struck by the fact that both critics place so much emphasis on the final section: Professor Brown has nothing to say of the battle between the cachalot and the kraken, and Professor Wells regards it simply as further evidence of the "chaos of nature" in the absence of human consciousness. I regard that as the important part of the poem, and I shall show in a moment that the poet has used it as a key passage in his work as a whole. Brown and Wells fail to realize that the sperm-whale is as sinuous and slippery as an eel — or a kraken. To put it plainly, they fail to see that kraken and cachalot are differing aspects of the same principle of power — whether that principle be

embodied in nature or in the conscious and subconscious mind of man.

The significance of the kraken is revealed in an extraordinarily vivid passage at the beginning of the second part. We see him crouched in his cave at the sea-bottom:

> A dull reptilian silence hung
> About the walls, and fungus clung
> To knots of rock, and over boles
> Of lime and basalt poisonous weed
> Grew rampant, covering the holes
> Where crayfish and sea-urchins breed.
> The upper movement of the seas
> Across the reefs could not be heard;
> The nether tides but faintly stirred
> Sea-nettles and anemones.
> A thick festoon of lichens crawled
> From crag to crag, and under it
> Half-hidden in a noisome pit
> Of bones and shells a kraken sprawled.
> Moveless, he seemed, as a boulder set
> In pitch, and dead within his lair,
> Except for a transfixing stare
> From lidless eyes of burnished jet,
> And a hard spasm and then
> Within his viscous centre, when
> His scarbrous feelers intertwined
> Would stir, vibrate, and then unwind
> Their ligatures with easy strength
> To tap the gloom, a cable length;
> And finding no life that might touch
> The mortal radius of their clutch,
> Slowly relax, and shorten up
> Each tensile tip, each suction cup,
> And coil again around the head
> Of the mollusc on its miry bed,
> Like a litter of pythons settling there
> To shutter the Gorgonian stare.

The kraken is an image of terror, a symbol of destructive power, though all his movements are so perfectly synchronized that he is not lacking in a certain grace and beauty of his own. His destructive nature has its self-

destructive side, imposing on him the lack of mobility which makes him fall victim to the cachalot. The cachalot himself is mainly expressive of the splendour of power: he is described in the first section of the poem as "a marvel . . . cast from time's hand", and we are told that he is the conqueror of all his kind. Yet he is capable of great destruction, and after he has slain the kraken, and gorged on his body, he begins to assume a rather different significance. Perhaps we do not forget that he is the hero, the knight-errant of the seas ready to challenge all comers, but we see it is the law of his being to kill and to exterminate ruthlessly. And we see that his power too is self-destructive. After the triumph of the kill, he falls asleep on the waves, and it is there that he is spied by the lookout on the whaler: changed now to

> Terror of head and hump and brawn,
> Silent and sinister and grey,
> As in a lifting fog at dawn
> Gibraltar rises from its bay.

The crew are able to make the first assault while he still sleeps on the surface of the ocean — as helpless as the kraken chained in his deep-sea cave. We already sense the doom that is to overtake him, when, in his last desperate act, completing the circuit of his own destruction, he will charge the ship head-on and carry it to the bottom with him. Indeed, we have already sensed his doom in the second section, in his struggle with the kraken, and the concluding part does little more than reinforce the human implications of the poem. It points up the fact that, at its deepest level, *The Cachalot* is a psychological drama: for we understand that the conflict between the crew and the whale, between man and natural power, is in part illusory, and that the basic conflict arises from the psychological nature of power which the whale also symbolizes.

I have said that Pratt attaches a special significance to the second part of this poem. He returns to it in at least two of his later narratives: *The Titanic* and *The Submarine*. The liner in *The Titanic* is identified with the cachalot in a variety of ways: its first entrance into the water, when it stands "Poised for the launching signal", reminds us of the birth of the whale who was "launched" into the sea by his mother; it is dubbed "the Primate of the Lines", as the whale was king of the herds; it has the same "proud claim on size"; its christening in "a wine-cascade" takes us back to the moment when, after the kill of the kraken, the whale swam triumphantly on the surface of the ocean and "Over his back the running seas/Cascaded . . . in gold and beryl"; and, again, it has the whale's quality of being "more wonderful within" — a great

deal of emphasis being placed on the size and intricacy of its motors and internal structure in terms reminiscent of the description of the whale's anatomy. In the same way, the iceberg is frequently identified with the kraken, most notably in a passage where the berg is described as "A sloping spur that tapered to a claw . . . lying twenty feet below" the surface of the water and waiting "ambushed . . . in its lair" — phrases which remind us of the description of the kraken's cave and of Cape Delgado:

> Making a sheer and downward climb
> Of twenty fathoms where it ended,
> Forming a jutty scaur suspended
> Over a cave of murk and slime.

In *The Titanic* and *The Cachalot* the two symbols are used in precisely the same way: they appear to be opposed, and they establish a certain contrast, yet they express the same basic and complex idea of power. In the other narrative I have mentioned, *The Submarine,* their submerged identity is fully revealed. The submarine exceeds in power but is comparable in kind to the "forbear of the whale or shark". It has the "vast inside economy" of the whale; it launches its torpedoes into the sea, as the tiger-shark gives birth to its young. It attacks and sinks a freighter, "a fat mammalian of the sea". It then flees from a destroyer, down to "a native lair as dark/As a kraken's grave". The submarine combines the "terror" and "grace" of power, kraken and cachalot, in one image.

There is another aspect of *The Cachalot,* which is not without some interest, and which throws some light on the question of Pratt's relation to the romantics. W. R. Benet has spoken of the "Byronic verve" of the poem, and there is a curious echo of the beginning of *The Prisoner of Chillon* in the first lines of the second section:

> Where Cape Delgado strikes the sea
> A cliff ran outward slantingly
> A mile along a tossing edge
> Of water towards a coral edge . . .

That is the clearest verbal echo of Byron's poem in *The Cachalot,* but there are various minor points of similarity: the kraken's cave is under the sea, as the dungeon of Chillon was below water-level; it is made of rock and lime and basalt; its floor is littered with the bones of the kraken's prey, as the dungeon held the skeletons of those who had died there; and so on. But the comparison does not extend to the poems as a whole except in a superficial way. Pratt's manner is completely his own,

and his conception of power is ultimately quite different from Byron's in *The Prisoner of Chillon.* The opposition between power and freedom, authority and humanity, symbolized in Byron's poem by the prisoner and the dungeon where he is cast, seems too absolute to a poet of Pratt's temperament (I say "*seems* too absolute": I am not suggesting that the implications of *The Prisoner of Chillon* can be exhausted by a paraphrase of its political content alone). Pratt can appreciate the opposition between freedom and authority — indeed, it is implicit in *The Cachalot,* in the contrast between creative and destructive power — but he sees that problem within a more inclusive view of life. Thus, if the kraken is "authority", he is also the prisoner: he is as "moveless as a boulder" in the dungeon-walls of Chillon, but he is chained and helpless in his cave. The cachalot is "freedom", bursting upon the kraken out of the sunlight and the upper air: yet he is also an engine of destruction, and from the moment he kills and devours the kraken, his fatal destiny is certain. The symbolism is too complex to lend itself to a didactic interpretation. In contrast with the romantics, Pratt views the problem of freedom and authority in a variety of contexts; he sees it against the background of nature and of history, and, finally, in terms of modern psychology. It is the psychological aspect of his vision which makes it so thoroughly contemporary.

The basic theme of *The Cachalot* is the psychological nature of power, but that theme thrusts out tentacles in several directions. Pratt's intention is too complex to be finally summed up, and I am sure that the interpretations of Professors Brown and Wells are not a total loss, though I do not think they are true either of any important part of the poem or in the way they were intended. There is a sense in which Professor Wells is right when he says that *The Cachalot* portrays "the chaos of nature" in the absense of human consciousness. Indeed, he is uttering a truism: insofar as nature is always altered in some degree by human perception, and insofar as that alteration is greater in poetic creation, what he says is obviously true of any poem. The transformation may appear very great in *The Cachalot,* where the poet invests the natural scene with a psychological symbolism, but we should never forget that Pratt is not an idealist: his view even of human psychology conforms to materialism, since he obviously regards reason as the result of an evolutionary accident. As regards Professor Brown's interpretation — that *The Cachalot* represents "the primitive overpowering the intellectual" — I believe it has a relative application to an aspect of the poem which he does not mention: the symbol of the kraken. It

seems to me clear that, in one of its aspects, the kraken should be regarded, not certainly as a symbol of reason itself, but as a symbol of the way in which reason may be distorted by the ego. Locked in its cave, unable to move except in certain prescribed directions, it is the perfect image of reason harnessed to oppressive authority or subjected to the processes of a consuming introspection. Viewed in this light, it has a certain autobiographical significance. In the analysis of Pratt's life which follows, I have tried to see his development as a poet in relation to his early career as a minister of the Methodist church, and I have suggested that he revolted decisively against theology, and against an obsessive preoccupation with death, in the period immediately before the writing of *The Great Feud* and *The Cachalot*. If the kraken is a perfect image for introspection, it is also identified with death: its basalt cave is like the cave of death, shrouded in night and littered with the bones of its victims, and when it battles with the whale, its blood pours out in an "acherontic flood of sepia." Its destruction by the cachalot, which bursts upon it from the clean light and air at the surface of the ocean, is therefore an effective symbol for the destruction of an introspection centred on the fact of death. In this connection, it is interesting to recall that the brothers in *The Prisoner of Chillon* are the victims of religious persecution — "But this was for my father's faith/I suffered chains and courted death" — and that Pratt's father preceded him in the ministry of the Methodist Church.

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I agree with Professor Brown that "what is peculiar to Pratt" first "appeared in its full splendour" in *The Cachalot* and *The Great Feud,* in *Titans* in 1926. Pratt was then in his early forties. Although he has been writing since he was very young, and had published two previous volumes of verse — *Rachel* in 1917, and *Newfoundland Verse* in 1923 — the greater part of his early work was markedly inferior in quality to *Titans.* Professor Brown quotes this little stanza from *Newfoundland Verse:*

> With grey upon the sea,
> And driftwood on the reef,
> With winter in the tree,
> And death within the leaf.

There are occasional good poems in *Newfoundland Verse* (the most notable is *The Shark),* but the stanza above is sufficiently typical to give credence to Professor Brown's opinion that the book belonged to the

romantic school then prevailing in Canada. *The Cachalot* is in rather startling contrast:

> The kraken felt that as the flow
> Beat on his lair with plangent power,
> It was the challenge of his foe,
> The prelude to a fatal hour;
> Nor was there given him more than time,
> From that first instinct of alarm,
> To ground himself in deeper slime,
> And raise up each enormous arm
> Above him, when, unmeasured, full
> On the revolting ramparts, broke
> The hideous rupture of a stroke
> From the forehead of the bull . . .

It is rather tempting to exaggerate the difference between the early and the later work. I believe Professor Brown does; but I agree with him that *Titans* has a special and, on first sight, puzzling significance in the development of the poet.

What produced the change in Pratt? Professor Brown suggests that, with the writing of *The Cachalot,* the poet experienced "a revolt against the abstract themes suggested to him by his philosophic formation; in this revolt he went back to the non-academic aspects of his experience, especially to what he had known in Newfoundland before he came to Toronto". Perhaps it is not quite clear what Professor Brown means by a "revolt against the abstract themes suggested to him by his philosophic formation". To judge from his statement that *The Cachalot* represents " the primitive overpowering the intellectual", it seems he is saying that Pratt revolted against abstract themes *and* against the intellect — a supposition supported by various other suggestions in his essay that the poetry is essentially hostile to ideas. This interpretation of the poet's development is clearly mistaken. To begin with, it is simply not true that Pratt's "return" to Newfoundland coincided with the writing of *Titans.* He had been attempting to make a realistic use of that experience throughout the preceding ten years, in the Wordsworthian narrative, *Rachel,* and in the lyrics of *Newfoundland Verse,* and he had not done so with any great success. Indeed he was much more directly concerned with his Newfoundland experience in *Newfoundland Verse* than he was in *Titans:* the former book is a regional work in every respect, whereas the action in *The Cachalot* takes place above and under the sea, off the east coast of Africa, and the action in *The Great Feud* on

the Australasian continent in prehistoric times "before the birth of man" — or well before the "oldest British colony in North America" was founded. I think it is wholly probable that both of these poems rely, indirectly, on the poet's Newfoundland experience; but I imagine it is significant that they are both set a points on the globe as distant as possible from Newfoundland: I would think it betokens, not a flight from place or experience, but a desire to avoid the regionalism of *Newfoundland Verse* (or I should say, the capacity to rise above that regionalism). Apart from that question, I think it is equally untrue that the writing of *The Cachalot* was accompanied by what Professor Brown seems to regard as a wholesale revolt by the poet against "his philosophic formation" and against the intellect itself. That is Professor Brown's opinion: I can see no proof of it anywhere in the poetry. There are many ways of showing that he is wrong, but I suppose it is sufficient to point to Pratt's indebtedness to Darwin, and to the psychologists, Wundt and James, whose teachings he expounded in the department of psychology at Toronto.

Before we can explain the causes of Pratt's development, we must have a better understanding of its character than Professor Brown attempts to give us. There are many differences of thought and style between *Titans* and *Newfoudland Verse,* but they are not always as absolute as he supposes. The two books have the common setting of the sea and the common theme of power. The difference in thought results mainly from a shifting of the angle from which power is perceived. In *Newfoundland Verse* power is seen in the light of the debate between religion and science: the view of an "evil" and a "good" power — the "evil" represented by nature and the "good" by man and his champion, God — is shown in conflict with another view — fortified by illustrations from Darwin and from Wilhelm Wundt — that man and nature are essentially one, and that the life principle of power is a complex of creative and destructive impulses. The conflict is usually decided, after long questioning, with an assertion of faith in the ultimate justice of God. But, by the time *Titans* is written, the debate has swung in favour of science. The poet has abandoned any formal belief in religion, although, as is clear both from *Titans* and from his later work, he has by no means abandoned his belief in the power of religion or in the efficacy of certain religious symbols. His re-telling of the Jesuit conquest of French Canada, in *Brebeuf and His Brethren,* suggests that he views religion as a durable and often noble expression of the power impulse; and, in a poem published this year in *Contemporary Verse,* he accepts the "Lord of Hosts" as

a *symbol* of order and justice. He has always accepted the symbol of Christ, and, as I have said, a Christian compassion is the fundamental element in his work as a whole. We must conclude, then, that the change which took place in his point-of-view, following *Newfoundland Verse,* was one of degree rather than of kind; and, if that is true of the development of the thought, it is also true of the development of the style. The early book is chiefly distinguished, as is the later one, by vigour and irony of style. The difference is that, in *Titans,* the juxtaposition of these qualities is more intimate and studied, and the effect produced more subtle and intense. The style becomes the perfect instrument of the idea of power, gaining in compactness and complexity with the thought.

Nevertheless, I believe there is one aspect of *The Cachalot* and *The Great Feud* which has no counterpart in *Newfoundland Verse.* It relates to the nature of the "inspiration". The early poems were written with a set purpose in view, off the top of the mind. *The Cachalot* and *The Great Feud,* though they may seem almost literal in their realism, are the products of an inspiration which comes flooding up from the subconscious. They have an extra dimension, a psychological depth which is missing from *Newfoundland Verse.* It is their vision of the psychological implications of power that sets them quite apart from the early poetry.

If we try to account for these various changes in Pratt's poetry in terms of his personal life, we will find the answer quite near at hand. I believe they can be explained, as nearly as the development of any poet can be explained, in the light of his religious background and training. Pratt was brought up in a religious household — his father was a Methodist minister — and he began his career as a probationer in the Methodist church in Newfoundland. He experienced considerable personal hardship as a probationer, moving about from one tiny and impoverished community to another, and in a parish at Conception Bay his health broke down. We are not told the nature of the breakdown nor the reasons for it. However, it seems possible that it was caused as much by doubts about his own calling as by the strenuous nature of his life. That he had doubts about his faith, or at least about his own capacity as a minister, is suggested by this revealing passage from the biography by Carl Klinck:

The hardest task before the young probationer was that of announcing to a mother or widow the dreadful fact of a death by drowning. As he had seen his father spend hours nerving himself for such an ordeal, so he approached each of his own with dread. Often he would take the

doctor along, and their arrival together became a fateful sign. The door was sometimes slammed in their faces. When they knocked, they lost their words in pity of the woman with children clinging, not knowing why, to the protection of her skirts.

Klinck goes on to say how often the theme of drowning figures in the poems of *Newfoundland Verse* (as it does, indeed, in so much of the later work), and we might add that several of these poems reflect quite directly the experience recorded by the biographer. Professor Brown thinks of Newfoundland as Pratt's fountain of youth — the perpetual source of a bouyant energy which is "juvenile in the best sense of the word". We are dealing with a very complex figure in E. J. Pratt, and there is obviously some truth in what Professor Brown says, but I believe it is the tragic aspects of Newfoundland life which have made the greatest impression on him and which supply the ground theme in his development as man and poet.

Pratt left Newfoundland for Canada when he was twenty-four and enrolled in the department of philosophy and psychology at the University of Toronto. After receiving his B.A., he held a lectureship in psychology for a period of seven years. We are told that, as a student, "He never wished dogmatic answers, but rather intellectual stimulation; he and his fellows debated everything". Nevertheless, the biographer assures us, "There is nothing to show that the German philosophy then prevailing at Toronto, or the psychology of Wundt and his laboratory methods, unsettled Pratt's religious views". My own belief is that the change in his attitude towards religion, expressed in its final form in *Titans,* had its beginning in the doubts I have already described — doubts which may have been a factor in his move from Newfoundland to Canada and which probably increased under the influence of scientific thought at Toronto, the influence of Darwin's theories as well as of the psychophysics of Wundt. However, the fact remains that Pratt, although he seems to have abandoned his intention of entering the ministry before his religious studies were completed, maintained an active interest in the church and in theology for many years. He continued to serve as a student minister after his arrival in Canada, mainly at a church in Clarkson, Ontario. After receiving his B.A., and while he was still lecturing in psychology, he studied for and received his B.D., and in 1917 he was awarded a Ph. D. for a thesis entitled *Studies in Pauline Eschatology* — a subject significant of his preoccupation with death. There may be many reasons for this protracted interest in religion, but I would say it is probable that Pratt went on in the face of many doubts chiefly out of a sense

of responsibility to people in Newfoundland, and it seems in a search for a consoling answer to the hardships and tragedies of their lives. It was a search which he conducted both through the medium of theological study, and, as his interest in literature grew, through the medium of poetry, in the writing of *Clay,* an unpublished drama, *Rachel* and *Newfoundland Verse.* How intense the preoccupation with death and salvation became, we have some indication from *The Iron Door,* Pratt's elegy on the death of his mother, which, though written in 1928 after the publication of *Titans,* takes us back in some magnificent passages to the more personal themes of *Newfoundland Verse:*

> And at this darkest moment, as I dreamed,
> The world with its dead weight of burdens seemed
> To pause before the door, in drifts and sand,
> And catacombs of rock and burial turf;
> For every wind that raged upon the land
> Had fled the nescient hollows of God's hand.
> And all the music left upon its waters
> Lay in the gray rotation of the surf,
> With calls of seamen in great weariness
> At their unanswered signals of distress;
> And all the light remaining was bereft
> Of colour and design in full eclipse;
> No fragrance in the fields; no flowers left
> But poppies with their charred autumnal lips. . .
>
> Then as the opening widened,
> And the sound became more clear, I tried
> With an insatiate hunger, to discover
> The fountain of that light and life inside;
> And with an exaltation which outrode
> The vaunt of raw untutored strength, I cried; —
>
> *Now shall be read*
> *The faded symbols of the page which keeps*
> *This hoary riddle of the dead.*

Whether we are to draw any specifically religious implications from "The fountain of that light and life inside" the iron door is a matter for debate: it is notable, however, that "the fountain of light" is identified with "life", in this phrase and in the concluding passage of the poem.

There is an optimistic note in the conclusion which Pratt seems to have found easier in 1928 than a decade before: the despair of the first lines I have quoted seems to reflect his earlier mood. In a comment on his own poetry, Pratt has said that he sought for a new direction in the twenties because he was "exhausted by the desperate seriousness of his early efforts", and it is a description which seems to apply to a wider area of his experience at that time than his creative work alone. Indeed it seems likely that, with his change of poetic direction in *Titans,* he turned from the "insatiate hunger" for Truth, the search for Ultimate Meaning, as from a self-destroying poison: though it would be rash to conclude with Professor Brown that he turned his back on ideas, or that his vision of terror and despair in the world and in the self did not continue to form the bass, theme of his work. His understanding of the destructive aspect of strength, and of the suicidal impulse in the ego, is to be traced back, I believe to this awareness that the fanatic search for an Ultimate, with its urge to godhead, was in the nature of a self-destroying power.

Here, I believe, we have the key to the problem we are trying to solve. So far as the immediate question of Pratt's development in *Titans* is concerned, the acquisition of this self-knowledge was more important than the influence of scientific thought. His intellectual doubts were of long standing, and, as I have said above, the change in his viewpoint after *Newfoundland Verse* was characterized by a shift in ideas already present in the poetry. It was obviously produced by a change in personal attitude: it became possible when he found it in his heart to turn away from a self-consuming introspection. That decision was not finally made until after *Newfoundland Verse,* but it was prepared by various changes that had been taking place in his life. After years of exhausting theological study, and of constant financial difficulties (he was obliged to lecture and do other work while he studied), in 1919 he settled on a life-career, when he entered the department of English at Toronto. He found himself established at the university, doing congenial work that left him more time for poetry, and living in fairly comfortable circumstances. He married in 1920. He broadened his circle of acquaintances, or at least he found more time for friendship, as Professor Brown explains in the course of his own essay. In short, he felt happier and more secure, and it was inevitable in these circumstances that he should find more energy for poetry and should develop in his work a greater realism and detachment in dealing with his obsessive earlier problems. Once he was able to view those problems at a certain distance, he found it possible to be fully himself as a man and as a poet.

In the light of these facts, we have some understanding of that element in *Titans* which, as I have said, chiefly distinguishes it from *Newfoundland Verse:* its strong subconscious drive, its depth of psychological understanding. Here the contrast between the two books is so sharp, that we may be tempted to attribute it to the crystallizing effect of some particular circumstance or event: but there is every indication that the development was a gradual one. It was first evident in a poem I have so far left unmentioned, *The Witches' Brew,* a humorous fantasy published in the interval between *Newfoundland Verse* and *Titans.* Pratt has said that he wrote *The Witches' Brew* to provide entertainment on the occasion of a fifth wedding anniversary. He had no other purpose in mind, and while his fantasy has something of the energy and the irony of Titans, it is as arbitrary in development as it is tentative in form. I imagine he was for some time unaware that he had made the discovery of his life. An interval probably elapsed before he realized the depth and the full implications of what he had undertaken as a light-hearted exercise, and before he saw that its method of free association could be applied to much more serious themes — applied, indeed, to re-shape and to explore the base of those very materials he had been struggling with in *Rachel* and *Newfoundland Verse.* An exercise in self-analysis and self-dicipline was required before the masterpieces, *The Cachalot* and *The Great Feud,* could emerge a year or two later. These two poems have the universal range which *Newfoundland Verse* lacks. They have that range by virtue of their psychological significance, and because they discover the motives behind the scenes of power and destruction portrayed in *Newfoundland Verse* and they include the man behind those poems. They are sufficient miracle, but they represent only the crowning stage of a long and arduous development.

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I have suggested above that Pratt's work is really unknown in the world of contemporary American letters. As an indication of that, I might mention a review of the *Collected Poems* in *Poetry* (Chicago), in which the reviewer — may he be forgiven — declared that Pratt was "one hundred and fifty years behind the times". As I recall it, he was at pains to point out that the world had undergone a change since 1800, and he cautioned Pratt that a mere test of physical courage and endurance, in terms of the conflict between man and nature, could no longer have much reality to urban man! I think the truth is that no poet is more

acutely sensitive to the contemporary spirit of things than E. J. Pratt, and, as it happens, the course of events has conspired to reveal that fact all the more plainly. No man in 1952 can fail to be conscious of the reality of power. It dominates our lives. It expresses itself, in part, in terms of the age-old, ever-real conflict between man and nature: centred now in the atom, with its promise of abundance, its threat of destruction. If we try to imagine for ourselves the natural background of this conflict, we conjure up a picture of that northern landscape, flashing into brilliant life for a short month or two, sheathed in ice the rest of the year, which is portrayed so vividly in many notable passages in Pratt and which seems to have exerted such a great influence on his whole vision. Here, in the north, is the greatest source of the new power: here, too, as we cannot avoid being aware, is the arena over which the armadas would sweep and wheel in battle if the tenuous balance of power were ever overthrown and shattered. For, of course, the conflict between man and nature has its reflection in the wars of society and in the struggle of forces within the individual mind. The same drama is being enacted daily in our own lives — and it is individual man alone, with his resources of spirit, who might conceivably control and direct power. Man's hope lies in the source of compassion, in the vital meaning of the Christian faith: but man's fate is still incertain. Pratt, as I have said, is too great a realist to discount the fact of power in the world or to imagine that the gift of spirit comes in an automatic manner. He does not deny the possibility of spiritual change, but he forces us to recognize that the crisis in modern society, however acute it may be, is really an old and recurrent phenomenon. Indeed, it is because his vision is universal in its grasp, that it brings us so close to the contemporary world and bears upon us with such disturbing force.

John Sutherland

THE ARTS

THE ART OF JACK NICHOLS

The salient fact about Jack Nichols is that he is a painter of people, ordinary recognizable identifiable people, worked up in closest possible unison with whatever may be their particular physical and/or psychological circumstances. And so, in terms of contemporary Canadian painting he is on this count alone a rare bird indeed. Because whatever their achievements elsewhere our artists have concerned themselves very little with talk about the human kind.

Montrealers tend to taunt Toronto and other Canadian places thus: "twenty-five years after your artists continue to see with the eyes of the Group of Seven, advancing on original lines not at all, repeating slavishly an artistic message which has long since made its point." Contrariwise the latter are frequently heard scoffing at those Quebecois artists allegedly so under the thrall of the School of Paris — dedicating their every creative energy to "making Picassos". These strictures — on both sides — are of course as full of holes as a sieve. Painting in Canada, on balance the most advanced of our arts, grows progressively more diverse, until now few generalizations are incontrovertible. That is, save that crucial one; at most our artists are interested in people simply as an essay in form or design. The challenge of the human equation somehow almost completely escapes their easel. Not so happily with Nichols; people, what they are like and what makes them 'tick' represent the point of beginning and the full continuing light of all his artistic purposes.

'Le style est l'homme même', said Buffon, which may be the truth. Yet as with most such dicta a qualification or two can improve it. This man, whose distinctive style is the badge, denotes the total consequence of a variety of forces beginning with or before (one's beliefs here depend on personal views concerning heredity and environment) the natal day. Almost invariably, for example, the Nichols people are composites, that is to say types assembled out of a collective memory as opposed to a graphic response to a specific type or a posed model. And since Nichols has the kind of honesty which is almost child-like in its spontaneity his 'style' mirrors with special fidelity the principal facts of his thirty-one odd years. Some knowledge of these biographical facts then makes it easier, I think, to assess his work 'in the round'.

His parents were of Ukranian extraction but Nichols, who is Montreal - born, quite properly considers himself as indigenous a Canadian as any other immigrant descendant, a grouping encompassing our entire population excepting alone the pure-blooded Indian. Responsibility for his own keep came to him early. At fourteen he was an orphan seeking jobs of any sort — dishwasher, waiter, deckhand — which would provide maintenance. Even then, however, there was the irresistible compulsion to become an artist. And thus for several years the pattern was invariable. He would take a job, save money, quit when he had a slender margin, paint and then once his funds were exhausted begin all over again. In these circumstances no formal art education was possible, yet more important probably to his particular kind of 'calling' he came into intimate contact at an impressionable age with all manner of humanity. Then too in different ways, three men successively, Louis Muhlstock, F. H. Varley, and Douglas Duncan the uniquely perceptive director of Toronto's 'Picture Loan Society' aided and abetted him. Ironically, however, it was the war which provided his first real opportunity. In 1943 he was commissioned to do paintings for the Canadian Merchant Navy, and the following year he was appointed an official Naval War Artist. His 'Rescue at Sea' won the prize for the best picture in the Canadian Group of Painters Show, 1945, a tribute both to Nichols and the quality of the Canadian war art programme.

And in the intervening period art, in one form or another, has been his sole preoccupation. During 1947-48 a Guggenheim Scholarship (only one other Canadian, Carl Schaefer, had been previously so honoured) provided a chance to study in the United States; and as a result print-making in Canada acquired a new disciple. Art, Nichols reasons, should be within the reach of all men. Lithography appeared to him an eminently practical vehicle. A subsequent short spate of teaching on the staff of the Vancouver School of Art in turn gave way to an appointment at the Ontario College of Art, Toronto, where he still is. Nichols, like most Canadian painters, must instruct to keep a smile on the face of his banker. But creation is his first love, and there is small chance this devotion will ever slacken. That already he has been elected to membership in nearly all the national painting organizations is an extraordinary tribute to such a young man.

So much for the background. What is the work of Nichols like and what are his individual artistic purposes? A first fact naturally has been that unswerving concern with people; people at work and at their leisure, all their emotions and 'inner tensions' to the full extent of his

capacity laid bare. Nichols is only prepared to depict the types whom he hopes he truly 'feels'. Thus prior to the period of his war service his studies were largely of those he associated with in the course of his various enforced employments. Strictly speaking, (but how dated that adjective now sounds) they were mostly 'working' people, very unsure of what their to-morrows held: men playing pool or dancing of an evening in a sordid down-town dancehall; boxers exulting in the physical hurt they imposed, even as other men rejoice in intellectual hurt of their brother; emaciated infinitely wistful-faced children born into the world during the depression of the thirties. And detached observer, true artist that he is, these works are utterly free of moralising. Just as Goya and Hogarth, in earlier times described aspects of their respective societies, so Nichols essayed to capture elements of his own. But he would not presume to place blame or insinuate a solution. Disinterestedness in a painter, like impartiality in a judge, is a first responsibility all the time.

The war pictures naturally enough were in the nature of a specific, pre-ordained up to a point, assignment. The life of the men on the ships was the thing. People should know something of what our sailors endured and achieved. The temptation in such circumstances to become a cameraman of sorts would be hard to resist. Nichols did not succumb by so much as a single brushstroke. Sweat, struggle, oaths, simple companionship above and below deck: the triple enemies of a pitiless sea, an inscrutable foe and the endless tedium of waiting: these are qualities which come powerfully true. As a documentor of the Canadian *soul* at war, Nichols is probably without a peer.

Postwar work is a broadening out of what came before. The interest remains fixed on ordinary people, though happily the subjects have ceased to be victims either of economic injustice or an unsought war. Warmth, compassion; these Nichols has always had, but previously the emotional range was sombre, and, perhaps simply because of his habitual subject-matter, substantially limited. Newer works on the other hand have an altogether captivating lyricism and an infinitely wider catholicity of feeling. Very loving mother and child groupings, wonderfully fanciful children delighting in a crude paper hat or a skipping rope, occasionally pure fantasy-like people who nonetheless have something important to say: such in short is the present stage of evolution and it shines with promise.

I am diffident, in an inevitably unillustrated article, to mention technique. Without any guideposts of reference, comment is sure to lack the crucial salt. For colour in the final analysis is indescribable, and so

are the nuances of fine line. All I dare essay are a few very simple observations.

Matisse once remarked that anyone aspiring to paint should eschew colour until the hurdle of incisive draftsmanship has been properly cleared. Nichols, force majeur, followed this counsel. He could not afford more ambitious materials and so nearly everything in his preliminary period was black and white; alternately pencil, charcoal or pen and india ink. Just the same this enforced apprenticeship has served him well; in study after study there is that same solid cadre, and the kind of drawing which 'cuts to the quick'. During the past ten years, largely in crayon or thin oil, colour has come gradually to suffuse his canvasses. But even now it is frequently monochromatic or muted, though nonetheless strangely glowing, as if its principal function was to provide the illusion of breathing to a body already fully alive.

Placing Nichols with precision is tantalizing. He belongs to no particular period, or school, and whatever indebtedness he has is to old European masters rather than the contemporary ones anywhere. He is too the anomaly of a realist, who is not literal. You know very well what you see and yet concurrently there is a furious scuffing off of expendible surface things. This probing is ruthless, but without exception kindly and gentle. It is high time for Canadians to ponder what man is and is not. And it is good fortune that in Jack Nichols we have so talented and civilized a first prophet.

Andrew Bell

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE. A PLACE IN THE SUN.

There should be no need to apologize for the irresistible impulse to measure films against the novels or plays from which they have been taken. Comparison, whether with something that exists, or with the 'might have been' that shimmers behind inadequacy, is the groundwork of criticism. It is clearly understood that the comparison cannot be made merely on the basis of a literal translation from one medium to another, and further, that the film under consideration must be viewed primarily in its own right: is it a good film? Yet there is much to be gained from an examination of the original material, and the ways in which the derivative work has enhanced or diminished it, or exactly caught its essence.

The film *A Streetcar Named Desire* follows closely Tennessee Williams' play about the final disintegration of a nymphomaniac. The setting, except for the opening scene and two others, is restricted to that of the stage play — the exterior and interior of a first-floor flat in a raffish New Orleans district. Hovering closely over the central characters, an accomplished camera creates an appropriately oppressive atmosphere; and the close shots toward the end of the film convey with intensity the heroine's sense of being ruthlessly cornered. Vivian Leigh gives an outstanding performance as Blanche DuBois, and Marlon Brando's Stanley Kowalski is as satisfying on the screen as it was on the stage.

As a result of some slight shifts of emphasis, however, the film version is subtly changed in quality from the stage interpretation under the same director. In the stage production, the relationship between Stanley and Blanche is not so much that of villain and victim; Blanche attracts our sympathy because she is helpless and vulnerable, but her destruction is in large part self-provoked. It is made quite clear, for one thing, that Blanche is as much attracted by her brother-in-law as she is repelled, so that Stanley's words in the second scene, "If I didn't know you was my wife's sister I'd get ideas about you!" have an added significance. On the night when Stella has been taken to the hospital, and Blanche herself implants the idea in Stanley's mind, it is not, as in the film, out of unalloyed fear; and her resistance is all the more desperate because she is divided within herself. For though the film tries its best to do so, it is impossible to toss Stanley off as merely coarse and brutal. Coarse and brutal he is, but at the same time, we are often in sympathy with the things he says. The play presents Stanley as a contributing factor rather than a prime cause of Blanche's unhingement; in this less responsible position, he is permitted an integrity which the film denies him. His quarrel with Blanche is not her past itself; to him she is a sham, and on the basis of this sham, has tried to alienate his wife and trap his friend into marriage. "You're goddam right I told him", he says. "I'd have that on my conscience the rest of my life if I knew all that stuff and let my best friend get caught." Blanche, on the other hand, when confronted by Mitch, says, "I don't tell truth. I tell what ought to be truth." These are two opposite camps, with a large part of humanity divided between them. Blanche and Stanley commit equal sins of vanity, and they are enemies because the glass wall of individual conditioning which allows them to see one another does not let them reach through to understanding. Thus the stage production which I saw went beyond the sordid to a sense of waste on a tragic level.

However, there is really little justifiable quarrel with the film interpretation. Except for a few concessions to the Hayes Office which result in minor blemishes on the audience's understanding, and the implication that Stella will leave her husband, which is a natural outcome of diminishing Stanley, the film is a literal translation, if not a complete fulfillment, of the play. It is still absorbing drama, with acting and photography that are worth seeing.

But with all leniency towards changes in handling a theme, it is another matter to falsify the marrow of an author's statement and flaunt the falsehood under the author's name. This the movie *A Place in the Sun* has done. The essential plot situation is that of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy:* it is the story of Clyde Griffiths' loneliness in a strange town where he is employed by a wealthy uncle but ignored socially; of his involvement, against company rules, with Roberta Alden who works in his department; of the sudden miraculous opening to him of his uncle's world, and the love of the debutante he had seen and idolized from a distance; of his discovery, just as he seeks to extricate himself from his relationship with Roberta, that she is pregnant; and of his attempts to free himself from the consequences of this, leading eventually to the death of Roberta and his own execution.

The skeleton of the plot is Dreiser's, but the characters and surrounding circumstances have been changed in such a way that what the film has to say has nothing to do with Dreiser's thesis. What Dreiser called greed, the film presents as normal ambition. What in the novel was upperclass snobbery and materialism is normal precaution in the film. Roberta, one of the few figures of stature presented by Dreiser, is mercilessly reduced, while Sondra, the self-centred debutante, is transformed to pure sweetness and light. The Clyde Griffiths of the film is weak and passive, but these are almost his most serious faults; as for the rest, he is made as much as possible the victim of circumstances. Finally, the film's conclusion is forced into triteness, while the novel's criss-crossing ironies are a remarkable attempt to show how multiple-faceted is that diamond, truth. In fairness to Dreiser, the acknowledgement should have read, *"suggested by An American Tragedy".*

But there is no reason why the situation as the film chose to present it should not have made exceptional cinema. Certainly George Stevens has made clever and effective use of the fluid montage technique developed in Russian film; and the sharp dramatic quality of the courtroom scenes is excellent camera work in a contrasting style. Certain sequences like those which set forth the bitter isolation of the furnished-room dweller,

and Roberta's visit to the doctor, are handled with insight and warmth. Especially deserving of praise and encouragement is the attempt to handle such a difficult subject as the criminal latency in an average human being.

The main weakness of *A Place in the Sun* is in the characters of Clyde and Sondra. The parts were written as colorless idealizations that are altogether out of keeping with the realism of the subject, and they are acted with a vacuousness that drains the film of its vitality. For scenes at a time, the film is as bloodless as an illustrated lecture on case histories. We can almost hear the instructor saying, as he points to the lantern slide, "Here we see Clyde trying to bring himself to murder Roberta." We look at the beads of sweat on his forehead, we nod. We understand with our minds that he is under a strain, but the pressure of conflict is not made emotionally real to us.

Belle Pomer.

BOOKS

LIGHT ON A DARK HORSE, by Roy Campbell. Palm Publishers, Montreal. 347 pp.

VENTURE TO THE INTERIOR, by Laurens van der Post. Clarke, Irwin, Toronto. 241 pp. $3.00.

Evidently South Africa drives out the best of her writers, yet never allows them to escape the bright, hot, harsh sweep of continent in which they were raised. Although Roy Campbell and Laurens van der Post have both lived outside Africa for the better part of their adult lives, it is Africa which gives their books impetus and weight, Africa which stands at the end as much as at the beginning.

Van der Post quotes Sir Thomas Browne: "We carry with us the wonders we seek without us: there is all Africa and her prodigies in us." And even on a quite literal level both writers recall what seem wonders indeed. Van der Post relates how his mother, at the age of eighty, moved to a tract of land "on the edge of the Kalahari desert". She decided where water was to be found, and three contractors drilled without success. Then, there being no other contractors willing to take on the job, the old lady bought her own equipment; and with the assistance of an elderly geologist, drilled until water was discovered.

Roy Campbell's family was equally as original, eccentric and tough. His childhood, in a vigorous and expanding frontier society, was wonderfully free, spacious and adventurous. Yet, when he received a gift of ten pounds, this "tough-looking urchin" promptly spent all the money on "poetry books" at the local bookstore. The story could be apocryphal (Campbell *has* a tendency to self-dramatization), but even if this were so, it would still be significant. For both writers testify that in South Africa the frontier and European culture provided equally authentic stimuli.

It was a world which seems to belong to a time far removed from the grey, confined circumstances to which we are becoming accustomed. But there was another Africa — the dark, ominous underside — and a guilt we usually identify with the American South. Campbell and van der Post differ in their views, but both books remind us that Dr. Malan has merely given a new name and a more obvious form to an ancient and bitter quarrel.

Roy Campbell is a very good contemporary poet, whose reputation has never been as high as it deserves. He quotes T. E. Lawrence's description of his first book of poetry: "Normally rhetoric so bombastic would have sickened me. But what originality, what energy, what freshness and enthusiasm, and what a riot of glorious imagery and colour. Magnificent I call it!" The description might well be applied to *Light on a Dark Horse,* Campbell's partial autobiography. For the bombast has not weakened over the years, but neither have Campbell's virtues. He writes page after page of vivid, precise description of the luxuriant natural world which absorbed his youth. He describes with equal liveliness and vigor his life in London and his career as sailor, fisherman, bull-fighter and semi-beachcomber in Provence, Spain and elsewhere. Everything is blatantly personal, even self-congratulatory. Yet Campbell possesses an authentic energy and essential generosity which are immensely refreshing and generally admirable.

Except, that is, when he writes about politics. Then he can sneer at France as "a third-rate masonic republic" and speak of "the homosexual and yiddish freemasonries" among English writers. His attitude towards the South Africa natives is ambiguous; towards the Jews, even less savory. As a Roman Catholic convert, he writes about the Spanish Civil War in a way which denies the scruples which many good Catholics — Maritain and Bernanos, to name two — felt forced to record. All this is obviously shabby and adolescent, and I mention Campbell's politics chiefly because he seems to be coming back to public favour. And while I hope that his reputation as a writer will increase, it would be a pity if he found disciples willing to give his political views serious attention — which is, alas, precisely what has been happening in the case of Ezra Pound.

Some years ago, in South Africa, Roy Campbell, Laurens van der Post and William Plomer edited a short-lived magazine called *Voorslag.* It is not clear when van der Post left South Africa, but during the war he fought in the Far East and was a prisoner of the Japanese. Afterwards he undertook a journey for the British Government into two remote areas of Nyasaland — to investigate a mountain named Mlanje and the Nyika plateau. *Venture to the Interior* is the story of that trip.

Almost any journey into one of the earth's mysterious backwaters has its own kind of interest and excitement. But in this case the journey was undertaken by a man who is also a wonderfully sensitive and perceptive writer. Van der Post's descriptions of the natural world are as vivid and exact as those in *Light on a Dark Horse;* and since he is

less obviously self-centred than Roy Campbell, he is able to write with more sympathy and understanding about all sorts of people. (Van der Post's sympathy for the natives is especially marked, and he writes with sadness and anger about the tragedy which is now under way in South Africa.) The districts which he had been instructed to investigate were shunned and feared by the lowland natives, and van der Post's attack on them was accompanied by hardship, danger and death. This is the stuff of which good adventure yarns are made, and *Venture to the Interior* is certainly successful in these terms.

But it is also a book with deeper implications. For van der Post belongs to that small group of modern adventurers who are also philosophers of a sort, and *Venture to the Interior* is in the tradition of books by writers like T. E. Lawrence, Malraux and St. Exupery. Van der Post had returned to Africa after tormenting experiences during the war, and with a conviction that fundamental disorders were threatening men everywhere. And in Africa it seemed to him that he was able to perceive for the first time the outlines of the danger which now overshadows us. Put very baldly, Laurens van der Post argues in this book that we have distorted and repressed the dark, fruitful and mysterious side of our nature — the Africa within us — and that our heedless flight from that other, at once more poetic and more earthy self may someday destroy us utterly.

This is no political platform, nor is it presented as anything of the sort. It is a kind of thinking which has its dangers, and which sometimes leads in *Venture to the Interior* to passages of a near-hysterical tone. Yet van der Post is merely a rational and sensible man, who has witnessed the extent to which we inhabit an irrational and disordered world. And much that he discovered on his journey is wise and sombre enough to merit our serious consideration.

Robert L. Weaver.

THE FIELDS OF LIGHT,
by Reuben Arthur Brower. Oxford University Press, Toronto.

The "new critics" of poetry, with their emphasis upon close textual analysis and their suspicion of the vague generalities which used to pass for acceptable criticism, have taught a whole generation how to read. Though the audience for poetry may be smaller than it once was, it is

surely hundreds of years since readers were as prepared as they are to-day to contribute so much energy and intensity to the task of reading a poem. The danger which now faces us is that this fruitful *method* may come to be accepted as a *creed.* There is an increasing tendency to substitute the elucidation of works of literature for the exercise of genuine critical judgment.

The strengths and weaknesses of Professor Brower's book, which is subtitled "An Experiment in Critical Reading" help to illustrate this point. Part One, "The Discovery of Design", is an excellent account of the roles played by tone, imagery, metaphor, sound and structure in the making of a successful poem. The analyses of individual poems upon which the author bases his discussion are shrewd and convincing, and one would have no hesitation in recommending this section to anyone seeking enlightenment about the nature of poetry, if it were not that the style, while clear, is rather flat and ungraceful.

In Part Two, "In Large Letters", Professor Brower applies the principles enunciated in Part One to the analysis of complete works. It is here that the weaknesses of his method become evident. The works discussed range from *The Tempest* to *Pride and Prejudice,* and from *A Passage to India* to Pope's *Epistle to Burlington,* in each of which Professor Brower distinguishes a dominant design which binds the work together and gives it shape.Though there is room for disagreement about some of his findings (but no space here to go into detail), there is no doubt that here, as in the first section, the author throws a great deal of light upon the poems and novels that he is examining. The mistake is to regard his analyses as constituting an adequate criticism. Design is a matter of meaningful relationships; it cannot be discussed, then, without some assessment of the experiences, attitudes and perceptions that are being related to one another. This involves, first, a "placing" of the work in its historical context in order that the true meaning of the elements in the design may be understood, and, second, a positive attitude on the part of the critic; he must be prepared to judge the richness and the validity of the experience offered. In his desire to avoid the false historicism which is one of the pitfalls of criticism, Professor Brower skimps the first requirement; in his attempt to establish a "scientific" method (the word is mine, not his) he eschews the second. The search for a foolproof method is one of the will-o'-the-wisps of modern scholarship; for better or for worse, the value of any criticism will always be the measure of the man who makes it.

I do not want, however, to close on this ungracious note. No one who reads *The Fields of Light* will come away from the book without

new insight into a number of poems, well-known and obscure — and that is more than one can say about many more highly touted volumes that have appeared within the last few years.

Neil Compton.

THE MULGRAVE ROAD, by Charles Bruce. The Macmillan Company of Canada Limited, Toronto. 39 pages. $2.50.

Of the two longer poems in this book, the first, *Words are Never Enough,* proceeds with a certain Whitmanesque gusto, with a line or two recalling Sandburg: "Heading up the tough men who get into the news". The buoyant tone appears with the opening line, "These are the fellows who smell of salt to the prairie", and

> Cleaning fish is a job you would balk at
> But nothing is mean with gulls hovering down,

seems very fine. What I like about the poem is just this touch of verve — present here only, or nearly, in this book; which may mean I feel there's room for a Whitmanlike expression in these parts. Across the border, of course, the positive note is no longer fashionable. Robinson Jeffers, for example, is a sort of Whitman in reverse.

When we come to the other longer poem, *Cornerstone,* the contrast is striking. It begins like an exercise in the manner of Auden with such lines as: "And a shot of Churchill and F.D.R. and Joe/With appropriate outlines," and "More interesting perhaps to the archaeologist/Will be the commoner things." Mementoes of our time have been put away — like the decorations on Auden's Christmas tree — not into the attic, but into a cornerstone to be dug by an archaeologist of "11,951 A.D." who may decipher a very unmerry Christmas indeed. Auden's variant of what may be called the "conversational" style in verse has been overworked by Auden himself. Pound seems to have taken over the method, with surprising vigor, from Browning, *Fra Lippo Lippi* for example, and it has been used appropriately by Eliot as in *Journey of the Magi* . . . "it was (you may say) satisfactory", but it was left to Auden to give it a particular nuance (which is far from being the best Auden): what Kenneth Rexroth has called, somewhat invidiously, "snide bright jargon" — extensively employed and highly contagious. But if a poet must wear hand-me-downs, i.e. follow the "tradition", he should at least redye the cloth.

Some of the shorter poems venture with more or less sureness on fairly well worn tracks across the metaphor-mined terrain of the "modern idiom," with interesting effects here and there. *Disapproving Woman* begins:

> The look she gives you is a tightened thread
> Between the stitches of her spoken thought.

and has one line, "Never unkind and never wholly kind", very neat, even if it does jerk the reader abruptly back to a famous line by Pope. In another piece occurs ". . . You know that age can be/A hill for looking;" and, elsewhere, referring to the old apple trees that remain on an abandoned farm,

> They still put forth a light ironic bloom
> Against the green utility of spruce.

Evident now and then, especially towards the end of *Cornerstone,* is an idea which I am not sure I understand, seemingly this, that "words are never enough" to indicate to other people, or people of the future, what we really feel and think: "Only by the peculiar logic of accident/ Shall they catch a glimpse of the dreaming blood and the mind." It is unlikely that Mr. Bruce means to imply that, while words are not adequate, painting, sculpture or music might be. Yet what do the arts effect unless just this, especially? Michaelangelo was certainly not of the author's apparent opinion when he asserted in a sonnet that not one of the artist's thoughts was incapable of being brought out of the marble; — and marble is much more intractable than words. And I don't think the author is referring to those presumable active formations in the subconscious whose expression in words is the essence of the Freudian therapy. Making an exception — affirmed authoritatively enough — of the mystical experience, which is obviously not the allusion here, if words are not enough, then what is? A little more and we'll be hearing that the best poet is the one who has never written a line!

W.W.E.R.

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